

A Monism of the Death Drive: Freud's Failed Retroactive Theory of Eros

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1. Introduction

Freud introduces a dualistic theory of life and death drives relatively late in his career in the 1920 essay *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, devoting much of that work to the justification of the hypothesis of the death drive. Surprisingly, he says little in defense of the “life drives” or the broader concept of “Eros.” Eros, he thinks, is not a radical modification of his previous views and so stands in no need of defense. It merely requires “the extension of the concept of libido to the individual cells” (1920: 60, note 1). Readers have followed his lead and mistakenly assumed that the concept of Eros—a direct instinctual tendency toward lasting sexual and social bonds—was always part of his psychological theory.

To the degree that Freud admits the novelty of the theory of Eros, he insists there is nothing troublesome or surprising about its introduction: “Over and over again we find, when we are able to trace instinctual impulses back, that they reveal themselves as derivatives of Eros” (1923: 46). If his new dualistic theory is precarious, the fault lies entirely with the death drive:

It was not easy, however, to demonstrate the activities of this supposed death instinct. The manifestations of Eros were conspicuous and noisy enough. It might be assumed that the death instincts operated silently within the organism towards its dissolution, but that, of course, was no proof. (1930: 119)

If it were not for the considerations put forward in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, and ultimately for the sadistic constituents which have attached themselves to Eros, we should have difficulty in holding to our fundamental dualistic point of view. But since we cannot escape that view, we are driven to conclude that the death instincts are by their nature mute and that the clamour of life proceeds for the most part from Eros. (1923: 46)

I will argue, to the contrary, that it is not the death drive that is a radical addition to his theory of the drives, but rather the concepts of life drive and Eros.¹ It is not death that is “mute” and impossible to locate in Freud’s theory, but life. And it is precisely the death drive, and not Eros, that is merely an extension of his libido theory.

I begin by arguing that Eros is not, as Freud claims, merely an extension of his theory of sexuality. His theory of sexuality permits the production and preservation of social bonds only through the restraint of instinctual aims, whereas the theory of Eros suggests that social bonds are a product of, and the direct satisfaction of, instinctual aims. Consequently, Eros cannot find support in Freud’s general theory of sexuality and society.

Next, I argue that Eros is incompatible with three fundamental elements of his general theory: 1) the drives, 2) the pleasure principle, and 3) the principle of constancy. Consequently, Freud cannot consistently keep Eros without radically revising the very foundations of his metapsychology.

Finally, I suggest that it is the death drive rather than Eros that is an extension of Freud’s original theory. I conclude that since Eros is incompatible with the foundations of his metapsychology, Freud’s drive theory can only be consistently interpreted as a monism of the death drive.

2. Eros as an Extension of the Libido Theory of Sexuality

“Eros” is the counter-principle to the death drive, which Freud describes as a biological tendency in living things to return to the inanimate state. The concept of Eros is developed in order to explain why the death drive fails to achieve this goal. Transposing his theory of human sexuality onto the relationship of the cells of an organism, Freud suggests, “We might suppose that the life instincts or sexual instincts which are active in each cell take the other cells as their object, that they partly neutralize the death instinct . . . in those cells and thus preserve their life” (1920: 50). Eros becomes Freud’s term for this extension of sexuality into the biological realm: “Eros, by bringing about a more and more far-reaching combination of the particles into which living

¹ Many commentators have remarked upon the fact that it is Eros, not the death drive, which is “beyond the pleasure principle.” However, they have not recognized the startling consequences of this fact: that, as I shall argue, Eros is fundamentally incompatible with Freud’s theory of desire and that, consequently, Freud’s theory can only be consistently interpreted as a monism of the death drive. See, e.g., Ricoeur: “If the pleasure principle means nothing more than the principle of constancy, must it not be said that only Eros is beyond the pleasure principle? Eros is the great exception to the principle of constancy” (1970: 320). See also Max Schur (1966), Hans Loewald (1980: 61-63 and 79-80), Michel Henry (1993: 314), and Jean Laplanche and J.-B. Pontalis (1967: 242).

substance is dispersed, aims at complicating life and at the same time, of course, at preserving it” (1923: 40).

But where does this erotic aim of combination come from? Eros is not, as Freud claims, a simple transposition from the psychological to the biological; nor is it a simple extension of the earlier theory. For an entirely new aim has appeared. Freud has never previously indicated in his theory of sexuality an essential tendency toward combination into “ever larger unities” (1920: 42-43) or a “main purpose” of “uniting and binding” (1923: 45). The introduction of Eros is a radical one because it includes the old theory of sexuality but introduces a new aim, retroactively revising the entire theory.² It now becomes necessary to reinterpret the sexual drives as including a tendency toward ever-greater bonds. If this revision of his theory fails, the dualism of life and death drives fails as well. For it is precisely this new erotic aim that distinguishes Eros from the death drive, and consequently, distinguishes *sexual drives* from death drives as well.

3. Three Elements of Eros as Aim: Relation, Preservation, and Activity

If Eros is merely an extension of Freud’s theory of sexuality—if the sexual drives are “the true life instincts” (1920: 40)—then sexual drives must share with Eros the aim of producing “ever larger unities.” For if they do not share this aim, there is no reason to treat them as an “essentially different class” of drives (1933: 103) and, consequently, no reason for Freud to maintain a dualistic theory of the drives. Furthermore, if there is an essential tendency in the sexual drives toward the formation of unities, then the social products of Eros—sexual and social bonds—must be traceable to the aims of the sexual drives.

However, a close analysis of Freud’s theory of the formation of sexual and social bonds reveals that this is not the case. On the contrary, we will see that sexual and social bonds, far from having their origin in instinctual aims, arise only from the *restriction* of the drives. The development of social unities is not the outcome of an instinctual tendency but rather a compromise between sexuality and necessity, made possible only through the introduction of the reality principle: Freudian sexuality is curiously non-erotic.

The aim of Eros can be broken down into three essential elements:

² Ricoeur (1970: 282) has suggested that the theory of Eros is a revision of the libido theory made necessary by the postulate of the death instinct. However he has not investigated at length, as I shall do, the distinction between the aim of libido and that of Eros.

- 1) An essential tendency to relate to an external object, since this is prerequisite to the formation of unities.
- 2) An essential tendency to *preserve* the relations formed with external objects, since Eros tends toward “ever-larger” unities, “a more and more far-reaching combination.” Although new bonds are formed, old ones tend to be preserved.
- 3) An essential tendency toward the *activity* of binding. The aim of forming bonds cannot be satisfied by the achievement of any particular bond. Although old bonds tend to be preserved, there is a tendency to seek new ones.

If the sexual drives are essentially erotic, if they participate in an essential conflict with the death drives, then each of these elements of the erotic aim should be shared by the sexual aim. I will analyze three aspects of Freud’s social theory to show that these three elements of the erotic aim are not shared by the sexual aim: 1) the taking of a sexual object by the subject, 2) the formation of lasting bonds with the object, and 3) the move from sexual bonds to extended social bonds.

4. The Absence of Eros in the Theory of Object Relations

If sexuality is grounded in Eros, then the fact that the subject seeks a sexual object should be explained by an essential tendency in the drive. But this is not the case. For if taking an object is a tendency essential to the drive, then it must be part of the aim of the drive. And if it is part of the aim, then it should be a necessary condition for the satisfaction of the drive.

Freud suggests, on the contrary, that satisfaction of the sexual drive is possible without an object. In *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, he tells us that the original state of sexuality during infancy is autoeroticism; it does not involve an external object, yet still involves satisfaction: “The instinct is not directed towards other people, but obtains satisfaction from the subject’s own body” (1905: 181).

This absence of the object is not merely a matter of circumstance. There is “no need of an object” at this stage (1916-17: 355); the external world is “indifferent for purposes of satisfaction” (1915: 135). If the autoerotic stage of sexuality is possible, it can only be because the object is *not necessary* for satisfaction. Consequently, we cannot include the erotic tendency of entering into a relation with an object in their aim. The move from autoeroticism to the sexual object is accidental to the nature of the drive.

If entering into a relation with an object is not part of the sexual aim, then what motivates the subject to do so? According to Freud, it is a question of the quantity of libido, rather than the product of a tendency intrinsic to the aim. “Libido” is Freud’s term for a specifically sexual form of quantifiable psychical energy, which can be used to describe degrees of sexual interest and satisfaction: “We have defined the concept of “libido” as a quantitatively variable force which could serve as a measure of processes and transformations occurring in the field of sexual excitation” (1905: 217).

According to Freud, the subject’s original condition is one of narcissism, in which there is “an original libidinal cathexis of the ego, from which some is later given off to objects” (1914: 75). The subject’s first inclination is, in accordance with the pleasure principle, to attempt immediate satisfaction through imaginary objects.³ But this form of satisfaction cannot be maintained indefinitely. The necessity of the move from ego-libido to object-libido arises, he tells us, “when the cathexis of the ego with libido exceeds a certain amount” (1914: 85). Presumably, then, the quantity of libido can be decreased narcissistically through autoerotic activity or hallucinated satisfaction, but not in quantities equal to the endogenous production of libido. Temporary satisfaction is accomplished narcissistically at the cost of an increase in the long run, making the move from narcissism to an object relation inevitable.

However, the relation to the object is still not essential to the sexual aim. Although there is a tendency toward object relations, it is quantitative rather than qualitative—it has nothing to do with the fact that the sexual drives supposedly belong to an erotic category of drives, but follows only from the quantitative level of excitation. In other words, the move is motivated by the reality principle. It is only because the overall discharge of libido is greater through a sexual object than through narcissistic satisfaction that the subject leaves the state of narcissism. And the introduction of the reality principle is precisely a move beyond the purely instinctual.

Consequently, this supposedly “erotic” tendency is not an essential tendency of the sexual drives. The sexual drive tends in the opposite direction—toward autoeroticism. It is only when the subject acts in recognition of reality, rather than in accordance with the aim of the drives, that object-libido appears. The sexual drive, then, is not a “life drive”; it is not fundamentally “erotic.” Life, it seems, is not a drive at all,

³ See, for example, 1911: 223: “The continuance of auto-erotism is what makes it possible to retain for so long the easier momentary and imaginary satisfaction in relation to the sexual object in place of real satisfaction, which calls for effort and postponement.” See also 1914: 85-86: “Working [excitations] over in the mind helps remarkably towards an internal draining away of excitations which are incapable of direct discharge outwards, or for which such a discharge is undesirable. In the first instance, however, it is a matter of indifference whether this internal process of working-over is carried out upon real or imaginary objects.”

but a modification imposed upon the drives by the subject in its recognition of reality. Life involves a *restriction* of the essential tendencies of the drives.

5. The Absence of Eros in the Theory of Sexual Bonds

If Freud is correct that Eros is an extension of his libido theory, then it is not sufficient that the subject enter into a relation with an object. The drives must also share the second tendency of Eros: to *preserve* the object relation. However, once again we find no such tendency. Freud's explanation of the formation of sexual bonds is similar to his explanation of the move from narcissism to object-relations. The bond depends, not on the aim—the qualitative aspect of the sexual drives qua sexual—but rather on purely quantitative conditions. According to Freud, the foundation of the family as a lasting sexual relation is motivated by the constant endogenous stimulation that is the source of the drives:

The founding of families was connected with the fact that a moment came when the need for genital satisfaction no longer made its appearance like a guest who drops in suddenly, and, after his departure, is heard of no more for a long time, but instead took up its quarters as a permanent lodger. . . . The male acquired a motive for keeping the female, or, speaking more generally, his sexual objects, near him. (1930: 99)⁴

Notice that this explanation is given ten years after he has introduced Eros as a fundamental tendency toward the production of ever-larger unities. If the sexual drives were erotic, there would be no need for the male to “acquire a motive” for the preservation of relations—the drives would be that motive.

Once again, we find that something that should be attributed to the aim of the drives is instead attributed to necessity: the return of the stimulus at the source of the drive. The formation of the bond is pragmatic; like the original move out of narcissism, it is based in the reality principle and, consequently, is *not* based in an instinctual tendency.

⁴ See also 1921: 111: “In one class of cases being in love is nothing more than object-cathexis on the part of the sexual instincts with a view to direct sexual satisfaction, a cathexis which expires, moreover, when this aim has been reached; . . . It was possible to calculate with certainty upon the revival of the need which had just expired; and this must no doubt have been the first motive for directing a lasting cathexis upon the sexual object and for “loving” it in the passionless intervals as well.’

We can underscore this point by imagining a sexual relation that conforms strictly to such a pragmatic motive. Such a relation would fit Kant's eccentric description of marriage as "the union of two persons of different sexes for lifelong possession of each others' sexual attributes" (Kant 1797: 6:277).⁵ The bond serves as a means to the satisfaction of the sexual drives, but it is strangely *asexual*. Of course, Freud recognizes that bonds are *not* simply practical arrangements; they do have a libidinal character. But they are not essentially sexual; their origin is not essentially rooted in the sexual aim. We can imagine the Freudian subject happily continuing in this affectless relation, since nothing in the nature of the sexual aim demands more than a strictly practical relation.

How then does the subject go beyond utility to love the object as more than a means to satisfaction? Freud uses the term "overvaluation" to describe interest in the object beyond its immediate instinctual utility. Appreciation, he says, "extends to the whole body of the sexual object" and "spreads over into the psychological sphere." But such an interest "cannot be easily reconciled with a restriction of the sexual aim to the union of the actual genitals" (1920: 150-51).

In the 1920 edition of *Three Essays*, he adds a note suggesting that overvaluation is due to what he calls "collateral flow" of libido (1920: 151, footnote 1). When the libido fails to find satisfaction "in the normal way," it "behaves like a stream whose main bed has become blocked" and "proceeds to fill up collateral channels that have hitherto been empty" (1920: 170). Freud is suggesting that in normal sexual bonds overvaluation is motivated by frustration, a quantity of libido that cannot be discharged and so must be redirected.⁶ Yet the subject enters the sexual relation precisely in order to avoid frustration. So where does this frustration come from?

The excess libido in overvaluation is generated by the subject's narcissism: Complete object-love of the attachment type . . . displays the marked sexual overvaluation, which is doubtless derived from the child's original narcissism and thus corresponds to transference of narcissism to the sexual object. This sexual overvaluation is the origin of the peculiar state of being in love. (1914: 88)

⁵ Pagination refers to the standard German edition of Kant's works.

⁶ See 1921:103: "We have already observed phenomena which represent a *diversion of the instinct from its sexual aim* [emphasis mine]. We have described them as degrees of being in love, and have recognized that they involve a certain encroachment upon the ego" and 1921: 142: "Being in love is based on the simultaneous presence of directly sexual impulses and of sexual impulses that are inhibited in their aims, while the object draws a part of the subject's narcissistic ego-libido to itself."

Now, the lasting libidinal bond was intended precisely to deal with excessively high quantities of ego-libido, to satisfy the sexual drives and decrease the overall quantity of libido. If this strategy were successful, there would be no excess libido to transfer to the object as overvaluation. Satisfaction of the drives would make overvaluation, and consequently “love,” unnecessary.⁷

In one sense, the cathexis of objects brings satisfaction: a greater discharge of libido is possible through the sexual relation. However, in another sense, it is a compromise that includes both frustration and satisfaction. The subject becomes dependent for satisfaction upon another; it gives up the immediacy of narcissistic satisfaction. The abandonment of narcissism requires tolerating low levels of libidinal energy in return for a greater overall discharge.

We have encountered, once again, the reality principle at the root of supposedly “erotic” bonds. The subject tolerates a degree of unpleasure for the sake of greater ultimate satisfaction. This tolerated level of excess libido is the ground of overvaluation, the interest the subject shows in the object beyond its utility for satisfaction of the drives. The “sexual bond” is not “sexual” in the sense that there is an essential tendency in the drives toward the preservation of object relations. On the contrary, there is a sexual bond only because the relation to the object includes an inhibition of the aim of the sexual drives—because the attempt to satisfy the sexual drives does not fully succeed.

6. The Absence of Eros in the Theory of Social Bonds

The third element in the aim of Eros is an essential tendency toward the *activity* of binding. This tendency is necessary because Eros is a continual process of binding; the accomplishment of unity does not bring the activity of unifying to an end. Consequently, the subject’s move from sexual bonds to extended social bonds should be due to an essential tendency in the nature of the sexual drives. But once again we find that this is not the case. Social unities do not, according to Freud, owe their existence to sexual demands, but rather to force: “Human life in common is only made possible when a majority comes together which is stronger than any separate individual and which remains united against all separate individuals” (1930: 95).

⁷ See 1921: 115: “It is interesting to see that it is precisely those sexual impulses that are inhibited in their aims which achieve such lasting ties between people. . . . It is the fate of sensual love to become extinguished when it is satisfied; for it to be able to last, it must from the beginning be mixed with purely affectionate components—with such, that is, as are inhibited in their aims.”

Consequently, the achieved sexual bond is not part of an over-arching tendency toward more extensive social bonds; the Freudian subject must be forced to expand its social ties. Sexuality resists the move to the social: “Directly sexual impulses are unfavourable to the formation of groups” (1921: 140). Indeed, they are unfavourable to such a degree that Freud suggests an “antithesis between civilization and sexuality”: “Sexual love is a relationship between two individuals in which a third can only be superfluous or disturbing, . . . When a love-relationship is at its height there is no room left for any interest in the environment; a pair of lovers are sufficient to themselves” (1930: 108).

This passage is followed by the peculiar comment that “in no other case does Eros so clearly betray the core of his being, his purpose of making one out of more than one; but when he has achieved this in the proverbial way through the love of two human beings, he refuses to go further.” Freud seems to have forgotten that Eros is characterized, not simply by unity, but by the tendency toward “ever-larger” unities. This oversight leads to the awkward result that, in the antithesis between sexuality and civilization, it is *civilization* rather than sexuality that fits his description of Eros. Freud later makes this point explicitly: “Civilization is a process in the service of Eros, whose purpose is to combine single human individuals, and after that families, then races, peoples and nations, into one great unity, the unity of mankind” (1930: 122).

But how is it possible for sexuality and civilization to be antithetical if both belong to Eros? Once again, the attribution of the sexual drives to Eros is unjustified. And we cannot solve the problem by suggesting that Freud overstates the case when he calls this an “antithesis.” The conflict of sexuality and civilization is not accidental: “It is impossible to overlook the extent to which civilization is built up upon a renunciation of instinct, how much it presupposes precisely the non-satisfaction (by suppression, repression, or some other means?) of powerful instincts” (1930: 97).

Nevertheless, non-sexual social bonds do have a libidinal character. They are characterized by affection, which suggests they rely on more than just force or utility. Freud may not attribute the founding of the social group to the work of sexuality, but can he at least attribute the libidinal character of social bonds to the sexual drives?

The affection found in social bonds, like the love found in sexual bonds, is not an essential tendency of the sexual drives, but is instead a product of inhibition; it does not motivate the formation or preservation of bonds, but is instead a product of those bonds. And, as with the move from narcissism to the sexual relation, this inhibition is not motivated by an instinctual tendency, but rather by the reality principle. Freud

believes that emotional ties—the affectionate characteristics of social bonds—originate in identification. Identification is made with a sexual object that has been “renounced or lost”; it is “a substitute for a libidinal object-tie, as it were by means of an introjection of the object into the ego” (1921: 108). So it is a substitute for the sexual relation and, consequently, an inhibition of the sexual aim.

But what motivates this substitution in the case of social groups? According to Freud, social feeling involves “the reversal of what was first a hostile feeling into a positively-toned tie in the nature of an identification” (1930: 121). In Freud’s “just-so story” of the origins of society in the “primal horde,” the original form of the social bond is brought about through a powerful, tyrannical tribal father who prohibits his sons from entering into sexual relations with the women of the tribe. The sons compensate for their sexual frustration by substituting identification with the father for libidinal object ties. Through their shared identification with their father, they are able to form identifications and affectionate bonds with one another. In the case of their bonds with the father, it is precisely their hostility to him that makes the affectionate relation necessary. Their sexual aims tend toward the establishment of libidinal bonds and hostility toward the father, but because such activities would put them in danger, they identify with him instead. Clearly, this does not indicate any essential tendency in sexuality toward affectionate bonds. It is only due to obstacles to the sexual bond that the affectionate bond becomes necessary.

Freud underscores this point in his explanation of how this social situation is preserved. The bond among the brothers enables them to eventually band together and murder the father, but this does not lead to a lifting of the sexual prohibition. Each son identifies with the father and wishes to take his place, causing the original pattern of rivalry and identification to reoccur. The brothers’ sexual aims motivate taking the father’s position, but any attempt to do so would put them in danger of sharing the father’s fate. The threat posed by the group toward any individual member ensures that the sexual prohibition stays in place. The brothers uphold the father’s prohibition despite his absence, and the continued inhibition of their sexual aims motivates the preservation of mutual identification and affectionate ties.

Consequently, the preservation of non-sexual social bonds, like their formation, depends not on any essential tendency in the drives, but rather upon the inhibition of sexual aims and conditions of rivalry. And the influence of rivalry shows that larger social bonds, like object libido and overvaluation, depend upon the reality principle rather than instinctual tendencies for their possibility.

7. The Incompatibility of Eros with the Theory of the Drive

My analysis of the three aspects of the erotic aim in the formation of social and sexual bonds demonstrates that Freud cannot equate the sexual drives with “life drives” or consider the theory of Eros to be a mere addition to his theory of sexuality. The concept of Eros cannot simply be added on. Its inclusion would necessitate significant revision of his theory of sexuality and of his view of how sexual and social bonds are formed and maintained. The postulate of Eros has shown itself to be so radical that at every level of social phenomena it is in tension with the sexual drives. Eros is achieved, at each level, through the inhibition of the sexual aim. The postulate of Eros is so peculiar an addition that Freud’s famous “struggle between Eros and death” somehow manages to transform itself into a struggle between civilization and sexuality—a struggle of Eros with itself.

I would like to further pursue this tension beyond the level of the sexual drive. It is clear that any attempt to defend Freud’s addition of Eros would require significant reinterpretation and revision of Freud’s theory. However, I will now argue that any such attempt is bound to fail, for the concept of Eros is fundamentally incompatible with Freud’s theory of desire. For it is incompatible with three central elements of Freud’s theory: the drives, the pleasure principle, and the principle of constancy.

Freud describes the drive as a psychological representation of a physiological stimulus: it is both the awareness of a physiological demand and the feeling of impulsion to satisfy that demand (1915: 122). There are three principal aspects of the Freudian theory of the drives, two of which are strictly incompatible with the postulate of the “life drives”:

- 1) The aim of a drive is to remove the state of stimulation at its source—the physiological process represented in the mind by the drive (1915: 122).
- 2) The drive is a reaction to endogenous stimuli and so does not act independently. The subject is impelled to act only given the presence of the stimulus.
- 3) The object of the drive is, apart from its utility to the aim, a source of displeasure. Pleasure is associated with the object only in its function as a means to bringing to an end the stimulus at the source of the drive. Because Freud associates pleasure with a decrease and unpleasure with an increase in stimulation, the external world, as a constant source of stimuli, is fundamentally a source of displeasure (1915: 136, 139).

An authentic “life drive” that includes an essential tendency toward the production of ever larger unities would be incompatible with both (2) and (3). First, because it is part of the aim of Eros to bring the subject into ever-greater unities—to form, preserve, and increase its relations—the aim of the life drive goes beyond the regulation of endogenous stimuli. It must also include the aim of increasing the quantity of excitation in the psychical apparatus, since the formation of lasting bonds requires a reception of external stimuli that is not subordinated to a greater aim of discharging stimuli. That is, the sexual bond must be an aim as such, not a means to the end of removing the stimulus at the source of the drive.⁸

This demand for increased excitation gives the life drive an independence from endogenous stimuli that Freud’s theory of the drive cannot allow. In Freud’s view, the drive depends directly upon the source, an endogenous stimulus. It is only given the production of excitation that there exists a demand for work. But if the life drive requires an increase in the level of excitation, then that demand that cannot be contingent upon any given state of the mental apparatus—the demand to form bonds will exist independently of the level of excitation. In other words, the life drive must be essentially active, in marked contrast to Freud’s theory of drive, in which the drive exists only reactively, in response to a certain state in the subject.

Freud’s drive theory requires that there be a state which, when it is achieved, temporarily removes the demand for work, while a true life drive, in contrast, requires that there be no achievable state which would remove that demand. If the life drive did include such a state, there would be no intrinsic tendency to maintain the sexual relation, and no intrinsic tendency to expand relations beyond the sexual bond. In other words, it would not be a “life drive” at all. Consequently, preserving the theory of the life drive would require rejecting Freud’s view that the source of the drive is endogenous stimulation, “the somatic process which occurs in an organ or part of the body and whose stimulus is represented in mental life by an instinct” (1915: 123).

The concept of the life drive is also incompatible with the third aspect of Freud’s drive theory—the assumption that the object is intrinsically a source of displeasure apart from its utility for the sexual aim. In Freud’s theory, the object of the drive is the means to the achievement of the aim, not a part of, or necessary to, the sexual aim. The life drive, on the contrary, because it includes the preservation of libidinal bonds in its aim,

⁸ Cf. Gilles Deleuze, who suggests that the binding of stimuli is not contrary to the pleasure principle, but the condition for its possibility: “It is the binding process which makes pleasure as the principle of mental life possible. Eros thus emerges as the foundation of the pleasure-principle” (1989: 113).

must include the object essentially in its aim. The means and end of the drive, in this respect, coincide. The object is essentially a satisfaction of the life drive, a satisfaction that does not depend upon the state of excitation at its source. Even though satisfaction of sexual drives provides a discharge of the excitation produced at the source of the drive, the life drive would still require the preservation of the object-relation for its satisfaction.

Consequently, the aim of the life drive cannot be, as in Freud's drive theory, simply "removing the state of stimulation at the source of the instinct" (1915: 122). Such a removal would be a necessary but insufficient condition for its satisfaction. The life drive would also require the rejection of Freud's definition of the object of the drive as "the thing in regard to which or through which the instinct is able to achieve its aim" (1915: 122). The object of a life drive cannot be essentially distinguished from the aim; the relation to the object is a necessary condition of satisfaction, not merely a means to it. The Freudian definition of a drive, then, is fundamentally incompatible with the theory of the life drives.

8. The Incompatibility of Eros with the Pleasure Principle

The concept of the life drive is also incompatible with Freud's theory of the pleasure principle. According to the pleasure principle, the mental apparatus is regulated by a primary tendency toward the "avoidance of unpleasure or a production of pleasure," where unpleasure corresponds to an increase, and pleasure a decrease, in the quantity of excitation (1920: 7). As we have seen, a life drive must include an increase in the quantity of excitation as an essential element of its aim, since it includes in its aim the preservation and expansion of object-relations—sources of constant external stimulation. But it cannot be the case that this aim—the *satisfaction* of the life drive—can be equivalent to unpleasure.

Consequently, the life drive requires the rejection of the pleasure principle. Either it must be possible for the subject to obtain pleasure in the increase of excitation, in which case we must reject the *definition of terms* in the principle, or it must be possible for the subject to seek pleasure without necessarily avoiding unpleasure (again, since increase is a necessary condition of the life drive's satisfaction), in which case we must reject the *formulation* of the principle.

Furthermore, because the increase of excitation is part of the life drive's aim, we must either reject the definition of unpleasure or, again, its formulation. If we reject the definition, we must say that it is possible for the subject to experience unpleasure in the

absence of an increase. For, according to Freud, the dissatisfaction of a drive involves an unpleasurable endogenous stimulus. And in the case of the life drive, that endogenous source of unpleasure must coincide with either the absence of libidinal relations or the absence of the extension of libidinal relations (the absence of “ever greater unities”)—i.e., with a decrease or constancy in the overall quantity of excitation. If, instead, we reject the formulation of the pleasure principle, then we must argue that it is possible for the subject to attempt to *avoid* what is, on Freud’s definition, pleasure: the decrease or constancy of levels of excitation, which are a frustration of the life drives” demand for the active formation of libidinal bonds.

9. The Incompatibility of Eros with the Principle of Constancy

Finally, and most importantly, the concept of the life drive is incompatible with the principle of constancy, which is the very foundation of Freud’s theory of human psychology. According to Freud, this misleadingly named principle governs every event in mental life, ensuring that the “mental apparatus endeavours to keep the quantity of excitation present in it as low as possible or at least to keep it constant” (1920: 9).⁹ There are three crucial aspects in Freud’s formulation of this principle:

- 1) The aim of mental life is to bring excitation to the lowest possible level.
- 2) The primary form of mental activity is reactivity in two, distinct senses. First, there is activity only in response to a stimulus. Second, this activity consists in counter-acting its source: the mental apparatus responds to stimulation by attempting to discharge it.
- 3) Although the constancy principle allows for the temporary toleration of excitation, it does so only in the service of a greater overall discharge of excitation. There is “storage” of excitation, not for its own sake—not as an independent principle governing mental life—but only in the service of the primary aim of lowering excitation.

The life drive is incompatible with all three aspects. We have seen that the life drive requires an increase of the general level of excitation for the satisfaction of its aim. Therefore, it cannot be compatible with the tendency to bring the level of excitation to the lowest possible level.

⁹ On the principle of constancy, see also 1900: 565 and 598, 1915: 120, and 1895: 297.

In Freud's explanation of sexual and social bonds, we saw that it is possible for the subject to tolerate increases of excitation, under the reality principle, in order to achieve greater ultimate satisfaction. In the case of the life drive, however, the motivation to enter into and expand social bonds is essential to the drives. The increase of excitation from external sources, in this case, is not compatible with the reality principle, since it is a direct satisfaction of the life drive, and not a means to a greater ultimate discharge. The principle of constancy allows only for the toleration of excitation that is already present in the mental apparatus due to endogenous or external sources; it does *not* allow the subject to actively introduce additional stimuli. The life drive, on the contrary, seeks a relation with external objects independently of the demand for discharge, and consequently, it is incompatible with (1), the tendency toward the lowest possible level of excitation in the mental apparatus.

The life drive is also incompatible with (2), the reactive form of activity according to the principle of constancy. The principle of constancy is one of "reactivity" in two senses. First, activity is initiated only in response to an increase in excitation that occurs independently of the mental apparatus (through external or endogenous stimuli). In the absence of such independently imposed changes, the mental apparatus does not act. In the case of the life drive, on the contrary, we have seen that it must be essentially active rather than a response to, and regulation of, endogenous stimuli. Consequently, the life drive must act independently of the principle of constancy, a principle that supposedly governs the entire activity of the mental apparatus. A true life drive would have the impossible consequence that a drive can act not only *independently* of the principle which supposedly governs it, but also, since life drives actively seek to increase excitation through libidinal bonds, *against* the principle which supposedly governs it.

The principle of constancy is "reactive" not only because it is a reaction to an independently caused change, but also because its activity is specifically directed toward neutralizing, or *undoing*, that change. The mental apparatus acts only in response to passively received increases in stimuli, and only in order to cancel out these increases. A life drive, on the contrary, does not merely seek to undo a change. As we have seen, its aim goes beyond the regulation of endogenous stimulation; it has as part of its aim the preservation and extension of libidinal relations.

By seeking preservation and extension, the life drive exhibits a tendency toward the introduction of change, rather than the undoing of independently imposed changes. The preserved bond, a part of the life drive's aim, increases the general level of excitation and, more importantly, introduces a *constant source* of stimulation. The

extension of bonds, also part of the life drive's aim, again increases the general level of excitation and, more importantly, adds *new* sources of constant external stimulation.

This activity of the life drive, unlike that of the sexual drive, is not undertaken as a means to the ultimate overall reduction of the level of excitation; it is not a consequence of the reality principle, a compromise between satisfaction and necessity. On the contrary, if the life drive has an essential tendency toward ever-greater unities, then it demands these changes as such, and not as part of a general attempt to undo the changes imposed by endogenous stimulation. Consequently, the life drive is incompatible with the both aspects of reactivity that are found in the principle of constancy.

Finally, the concept of the life drive is incompatible with the third aspect of the principle of constancy: the subordination of the "storage" of a constant level of excitation in the mental apparatus to the goal of discharge. The importance of this aspect is that we cannot view the dual tendencies to discharge and to store quantities of excitation as distinct and independent principles. There is storage (and, ultimately, toleration) of excitation only in the service of the primary aim of lowering the overall level of excitation. Consequently, it can never be the case under the principle of constancy that the mental apparatus undertakes the storage of energy independently of the aim of discharge.¹⁰

In the case of the life drive, on the contrary, the storage of energy must be independent of the aim of discharge. If the constancy principle is primary, the mental apparatus can only preserve energy that is already present in the system. If there is a life drive, however, we must allow not simply the preservation of quantities of energy already present, but the active introduction of new quantities. The life drive demands a constant tendency toward unification, a tendency toward bringing new quantities of excitation into the mental apparatus rather than simply storing quantities already present. Consequently, it requires a principle of psychical activity in which the toleration of excitation in the mental apparatus is not subordinate to the ulterior goal of lowering the overall level of excitation.

We may conclude, then, that it is not, as Freud would have it, the theory of Eros but rather the death drive that is an extension of his theory of sexuality and libido. Freud's argument for the death drive is a deduction from the hypothesis of the conservatism of the drives, the view that "an instinct is an urge inherent in organic life

¹⁰ Consequently, we can conclude that the life and death drives cannot be synthesized into a single psychological principle, contrary to Jacques Lacan's suggestion that "the distinction between the life drive and the death drive is true in as much as it manifests two aspects of the drive" (1977: 235).

to restore an earlier state of the things which the living entity has been obliged to abandon under the pressure of external disturbing forces” (1920: 36). It is a generalization of the principle of constancy, the extension of its logic of reaction and return into the biological sphere: the biological organism as a whole seeks to return to a state prior to the introduction of any independent change, just as the mental apparatus does when it seeks to cancel out any increase of excitation due to external or endogenous sources of stimulation.¹¹

It is this close relationship between the principle of constancy and the death drive that makes the introduction of Eros so difficult. Death drive and constancy are the biological and psychological levels of a single tendency; we cannot expect a tendency antithetical to death to find a place in such a theory. Because the death drive is merely an extension of Freud’s general theory, the addition of a counter-tendency in the form of a specifically erotic drive is impossible.

Eros can be added, then, only at the expense of the death drive. Yet the death drive cannot simply be excised, since it is a direct development, rather than a radical modification of Freud’s general theory.¹² The death drive is incompatible with Eros precisely because it is so deeply rooted in the theories of constancy, drive, and pleasure—the foundations of his entire metapsychology. Consequently, if Freud’s theory of the drives is to be maintained in a consistent form, it can only be interpreted, against his explicit intentions, as a monism of the death drive.

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¹¹ Cf. Ricoeur: “The death instinct turns out to be the most striking illustration of the constancy” (1970: 319) and Laplanche: “And it is quite true that with *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, it is the same priority of zero which, under the name of Nirvana, is being reaffirmed” (1976: 117).

¹² Jonathan Lear attempts to do precisely this in his excellent work on Freud—to save Eros at the expense of the death drive (1990, 2000). A full discussion of his efforts is beyond the scope of this essay. However, the key difficulty in Lear’s attempt is that he does not explore the deep connections between the death drive and the principle of constancy. To truly reject the death drive would require rejecting the principle of constancy and, consequently, revising everything in Freud’s theory that depends on that principle: the pleasure principle, Freud’s theory of sexuality, and his general theory of the drives.

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