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# The Evasion of Gender in Freudian Fetishism

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## INTRODUCTION

In *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, Freud rejects the notion of a biologically determined connection of instinct to object, a position which helps him avoid the designation of all variations from heterosexuality as either “degenerate” or “pathological.” However, the gender roles and relations commonly attributed to heterosexuality are already implicit in his understanding of sexual instinct and aim. Consequently, even variations from the normal sexual object and aim exemplify, on his interpretation, the clichéd hierarchical opposition of femininity and masculinity. Freud’s theory of sexuality thus implies that the erotic bond is inevitably one of domination, and that the only possible human relation is one of subject to object, activity to passivity, whole to part, and owner to property.

My primary intention in this paper is to explore, in Freud’s analysis of fetishism, traces of an alternate possibility to oppositional hierarchical gender roles and the negative forms of social relation that rely upon them. While Freud—in keeping with common opinion—characterizes sexual fetishism as a distinctly masculine phenomenon, the text also supports a more interesting interpretation: that the non-pathological fetishist evades the construction of gender in terms of sexual roles and that, consequently, fetishism can serve as a critique of Freud’s masculine model of sexual instinct and relation.

### 1. THE MASCULINITY OF INSTINCT

Freud claims that, regardless of an individual’s gender or object-choice, instinct is intrinsically “masculine”—at least in the general sense of “active” as opposed to “passive” (*Three Essays* 219, note 1). This is trivially true in the sense that instinct actively desires or seeks satisfaction. However, Freud’s description of instinct as “masculine” applies in a much more specific sense.

According to Freud, “unpleasurable feelings are connected with an increase and pleasurable feelings with a decrease of stimulus” (“Instincts” 120-21).<sup>1</sup> Because sexual tension involves displeasure, the “aim” of the instinct is “in every instance satisfaction, which can only be obtained by removing the state of stimulation at the source of instinct” (“Instincts” 122). The sexual “object,” on the other hand, is “the thing in regard to which or through which the instinct is able to achieve its aim” (“Instincts” 122). Put simply, object and aim are the means and end of sexual instinct. The object is valuable precisely because it is a means to the end of pleasure.

Consequently, the active and passive roles of instinct and object are embedded in the very nature of pleasure as described by Freud. Because the sexual aim is negatively understood as the removal of displeasure, the instinct’s relation to the object can only be active, and the object’s relation to the instinct can only be passive. The instinct does not (and by definition cannot) *receive* pleasurable sensations from the object. The achieved pleasure of the aim is the instinct’s “own” action—the removal of an internal stimulus to the external world through the use (the means) of the object.<sup>2</sup> Although the object qua occasion for the instinct’s activity is valuable, the object *as such* is almost irrelevant. Apart from its utility for the sexual aim, it can only be a source of stimulation and, consequently, of displeasure.

The consequences of Freud’s position are troubling. The sexual relation of instinct to object is, strictly speaking, no relation at all. This would seem to suggest that the sexual relation of subjects to one another is, likewise, no relation at all. Although individuals can serve simultaneously as an occasion for each other’s pleasure, the satisfaction of one individual is independent of, and incidental to, that of the other as

such. Each individual can only provide pleasure for the other as an object of that other individual's own activity, and not as an active subject. The other is not an object of desire that the subject seeks to incorporate or approach, but instead a painful external stimulus that heightens the internal stimulus of the instinctual source, necessitating the repulsion of both sources of stimuli away from the subject. The moment of satisfaction is precisely the moment that the sexual other loses its utility and value as a means to that end.

So the "masculinity" of instinct is not simply a matter, as Freud suggests, of the active nature of instinct. Freudian "instinct" is masculine in the specifically heterosexual sense that it only relates to its object as to its contrary. It can only achieve satisfaction in a sexual object qua passive, as the object upon which it acts. This view of instinct seems to suggest that all forms of sexual relation, including non-heterosexual ones, must involve to some degree the oppositional roles of a positively defined masculine (the active achievement of pleasure) and a negatively defined feminine (the passive occasion for the removal of displeasure).<sup>3</sup>

## 2. THE EMASCULATION OF INSTINCT

Clearly, the Freudian understanding of pleasure defies the common view in which stimulation as such is considered a source of pleasure, as well as making the formation of erotic bonds seem unlikely. And this would present a problem—if Freud believed that the relations between individual subjects mirrored the relations of instinct to the sexual object. Obviously they do not, and Freud readily admits this.

Freud calls such exceptions to the instinctual primacy of the sexual aim "perversions":

Perversions are sexual activities which either (a) extend, in an anatomical sense, beyond the regions of the body that are designed for sexual union, or (b) linger over the intermediate relations to the sexual object which should normally be traversed rapidly on the path towards the final sexual aim.<sup>4</sup> (*Three Essays* 150)

Perversion implies, counter to Freud's theory, that the subject derives pleasure from the sexual object *as such*, and not only from the object's utility for the sexual

aim. There must be a different form of pleasure involved than the removal of instinctual stimulation; otherwise the subject would have no motivation to involve parts of the body unrelated to the aim, or to "linger" in the displeasure of instinctual stimulus that precedes the achieved aim.

Freud attributes such deviations to an overvaluation of sexual object characteristic of anaclitic libido. It is, he claims, "derived from the child's original narcissism and thus corresponds to a transference of that narcissism to the sexual object" ("Narcissism" 88). The key to the distinction of perverse pleasure and the satisfaction of sexual aim is that the former is literally an *overvaluation*—an undeserved, perhaps *ersatz*, valuation that is derivative of ego-libido. While the instinct is fully satiated only by the aim, the psychical subject interprets every aspect of the object as a source of pleasure: "the appreciation extends to the whole body of the sexual object and tends to involve every sensation derived from it" (*Three Essays* 150).

Here we have a possible solution to the problem of the erotic bond. In Freud's view of instinct, the instinct and object were unrelated to such a degree that it implied indifference, and possibly antagonism, toward the object as such. There seemed to be little ground for a continued bond between instinct and object beyond the occasion of the achieved sexual aim. The subject seemed doomed, by the nature of instinct, to narcissism. However, because the psychical subject tends to overvalue the object that occasions its instinctual satisfaction, a psychical bond to that object can be established. Freud's general explanation for this possibility is that the continuous internal stimulation of instinct leads to an excess in ego-libido which can only be remedied by transferring narcissistic self-love to an external object: "this necessity [to attach the libido to objects] arises when the cathexis of the ego with libido exceeds a certain amount" ("Narcissism" 85).

So, we have reason to believe that the sexual relation is not as tenuous as it appeared earlier. Overvaluation allows for a new perspective, by the subject, upon the sexual object's value. The object as such is not a matter of indifference, but is in every respect pleasurable. How does this affect the gender roles of sexual relation? On the one hand, the instinct must suffer somewhat in its "masculinity"—in the broad sense of

its “activity.” The subject does *receive* pleasure *passively* from the sexual object. On the other hand, the specific sense of masculinity which I have stressed—masculinity which relates to the other as to its opposite—is changed, but not severely damaged. While the subject has become both passive and active—it both receives pleasurable sensation and expels painful stimuli—the object has not, by that fact, become active in the subject’s eyes. One might say that the subject can now *take* pleasure in—or *from*—the object as such.

Previously, the sexual opposition was simply that of activity to passivity. It is now an opposition of the subject as sensible (in both the active and passive senses, or discharge and reception) and the object as insensible. That is, overvaluation does not, in fact, enable the subject to value the sexual object as such. The subject values the object in all of its aspects—but still *qua* means to sexual pleasure. It overvalues the object only given its use for the sexual aim. If that utilitarian relation is upset, the ground of the object’s overvaluation is lost. This should be clear from Freud’s explanation. The need to move to cathect the object caused by an excess of narcissistic libido—in other words, an amount of instinctual stimulation that cannot be narcissistically satisfied. If the object does not satisfy this need by removing the excess tension, then the motivation to preserve the anaclitic bond is removed. Consequently, overvaluation of the sexual object can only exist given the continued attachment of that object to the subject for the purpose of the sexual aim—i.e., given its possession. The other cannot be valued in its absence to, or independence from, the subject.<sup>5</sup>

Though we have found an erotic bond, it still takes the form of a relation between opposites. The subject still takes pleasure only in the object’s passive relation to its own activity. Instinct needs and will form an attachment to a sexual object—but it does not value the sexual object *qua* subject. The fact that the object may also desire or receive pleasure—that it may also be active or passively sensible—is irrelevant to the subject’s pleasure, which is always in object *qua* object. “Attachment” libido, then, is closer to the possession of an object than a relation between subjects. The severe overvaluation of the object does imply that the subject views the object affectionately, but only in its relation to itself. A comparison could be made to the relation of

an individual to a prized possession, or to the auto-erotic relation of an infant to a part of its own body. The object is prized only as a source of pleasure, and it is, in turn, only a source of pleasure as possessed—subordinated to the subject’s sexual aim.

Consequently, Freud’s theory of the erotic relation—even given the element of overvaluation—does not provide a way of distinguishing human social relations from material relations of domination or property. The subject must, on this theory, encounter the other’s interests as irrelevant to its own, and must, therefore, desire a predominately passive sexual-object. This remains the case because the pleasure taken in the other as sexual stimulus (“fore-pleasure”) is only preserved by overvaluation, which is in turn dependent upon the other’s continued utility for the removal of stimulus in the sexual aim (“end-pleasure”).<sup>6</sup> Without the promise or guarantee of this continued utility, the overvaluation of the other cannot be preserved. Consequently, this form of relation can maintain itself only by relating to the other as dominated property—i.e., as what will not be lost or cause privation of the sexual aim.<sup>7</sup>

### 3. REASSESSING FETISHISM

My concerns about the Freudian model of sexual relation can be reduced to two central problems. First, the other is overvalued (found pleasurable as both active stimulus and passive satiation) *only given its continued utility* as passive recipient in the sexual aim. The other’s subjectivity—its independence and its own desire—poses a threat to its utility-value for the subject’s pleasure. I will call this the problem of domination. Because the other is not valuable—and is a source of pain—in its independence from the subject’s aim, the subject must desire continued possession of the other and subordination of the other to its own pleasure. In other words, the subject’s desire for the other must include the desire for the restraint of the other’s subjectivity.

Second, overvaluation does not give the subject any motivation to even recognize the subjectivity of the other. The overvalued other is identified *in its entirety* with its pleasure and utility for the subject. I will call this the problem of property. Every aspect of the other, not just its body or its sexuality, is viewed as an appropriable object of use-value. The other is not sim-

ply dominated, but also interpreted as a kind of being that exists in order to be dominated; in the subject's view, it is equated to an object-for-use.<sup>8</sup>

To avoid such consequences, an alternative view of the sexual relation would have to reject both points. First, the subject's overvaluation of the other as pleasurable stimulus must be independent of the other's continued utility for satisfaction—i.e., the subject must be capable of taking pleasure *in desire as such*. The other must be recognized in two aspects—the other that provides the pleasure *of* desire, and the other that provides the pleasure of *satiated* desire. Second, the subject must be given reason to recognize and identify with the other *qua* subject—i.e., to recognize that the other receives and desires pleasure in addition to providing it, and acts in addition to being acted upon.

Freud's theory of non-pathological fetishism bears traces of just such an alternative view.<sup>9</sup> Although, as we have seen, perverse overvaluation generally reinforces the oppositional form of gender relation and sexual roles, fetishism is an unusual case. Unlike other forms of perversity (including both heterosexuality and homosexuality), fetishism evades the construction of gender roles along the dividing line of castration. Consequently, it implies an entirely different subjective view of the other's role in the sexual relation, as well as an evasion of the connection of these roles to anatomical gender.

#### 4. FETISHISTIC REALISM

Freud has a peculiar tendency to speak of a child's disavowal of a woman's lack of a penis as a disavowal of the "*fact*" of castration.<sup>10</sup> Of course, the fact he has in mind is that of female anatomy rather than castration, but his careless confusion of the two "facts" is not trivial. Freud never considers the consequences of a different fact: that the fetishist's disavowal of a perceived reality is, in fact, a disavowal of *misperceived* reality.

Strictly speaking, the fetishist has not disavowed any reality at all. As Freud emphasizes,

The boy did not simply contradict his perceptions and hallucinate a penis where there was none to be seen; he effected no more than a displacement of value—he transferred the importance of the penis to another part of the body. ("Splitting" 277)

Contrary to the normal subject, the fetishist has all of his facts straight.<sup>11</sup> He disavows, first and foremost, the *misperception* (or misinterpretation) that women have been castrated. Thanks to this disavowal, he also can also disavow the *pseudo*-verification of the father's threat of castration. The boy's father will not, after all, castrate him for continuing in the prohibited sexual activity. Finally, the boy has not even disavowed the woman's *real* lack of the penis. The perception of the female genitals is maintained, but the child's *interest* is modified. So it cannot, as Freud claims, be true that in the boy's mind "the woman *has* got a penis, in spite of everything" ("Fetishism" 154). In the boy's mind the woman has got whatever it is that has been substituted for the penis. He maintains that the woman has a *phallus*, not a penis.

The fetishist's objective facts are all in order. He has not disavowed the anatomical difference of women. The peculiarity of fetishism has nothing to do with the facts, but with the significance of the facts. Is the boy correct in his assertion that the woman has a phallus? In a sense, he is. If the substitution of fetish for phallus is to be understood, we need to look at what the phallus represents to the child. At the fetishist's stage of development, the phallus represents the very locus of sexuality, of instinctual desire and satisfaction:

[The sexual instinct's] activity has hitherto been derived from a number of separate instincts and erotogenic zones, which independently of one another, have pursued a certain sort of pleasure as their sexual aim. Now, however, a new sexual aim appears, and all the component instincts combine to attain it, while the erotogenic zones become subordinated to the primacy of the genital zone. (*Three Essays* 207)

By attributing a phallus to women, the fetishist attributes sexual *subjectivity* to them. As we have seen, in Freud's theory of instinct there is little motivation for an individual to recognize the other's subjectivity as either receptive or active in sexual pleasure. The other is the occasion and site of the *subject's* pleasure alone. In fetishism, however, the child's narcissistic desire to protect his own penis motivates precisely such recognition. To be sure, he has not correctly recognized the nature of women's sexual subjectivity, but he is quite

correct in the belief that they *have* it.<sup>12</sup> Non-fetishistic subjects, on the contrary, have no such motivation for acknowledging feminine subjectivity. It should come as no surprise, then, that the belief in castration leads to a deprecating view of femininity. The male belief in castration can, Freud says, “permanently determine the boy’s relations to women: horror of the mutilated creature or triumphant contempt for her.” The female subject, too, “begins to share the contempt felt by men for a sex which is the lesser in so important a respect” (“Some Consequences” 252–53).<sup>13</sup>

### 5. THE FETISHIST’S EVASION OF GENDER

Unlike other sexual subjects, the fetishist has, in accordance with reality, attributed sexual wholeness and subjectivity to the sexual other generally and women specifically. In the fetishist’s view, women must, like himself, actively and passively experience sexual desire, pleasure, and satisfaction. However, it is not simply the sexual roles of subject and object that are undermined; the assignment of these roles to anatomical gender is also prevented.

The Oedipus complex offered the child two possibilities of satisfaction, an active and a passive one. He could put himself in his father’s place in a masculine fashion and have intercourse with his mother as his father did, . . . or he might want to take the place of his mother and be loved by the father. . . . Both of them entailed the loss of his penis—the masculine one as a resulting punishment and the feminine one as a precondition. (“Dissolution” 176)

Although the normal subject, due to the belief in castration, gives up the parent as sexual-object, this identification with a parent’s sexual role still takes place. For Freud, parental identification is the deciding factor in the subject’s gender character and object-choice. Fetishism, however, upsets the entire process. The motivation to resolve the complex, castration, is lacking. Even if the fetishist were to identify with a parent, this could not have, as a consequence, the assumption of a distinct gender identity. The fetishist does not, after all, view the mother as passive in relation to the father. His belief that the mother has a phallus destroys the normal perception of what gender is.

We have already seen that castration implies an absence of sexual subjectivity. In castration belief, female anatomy becomes the sign of this absence. However, in the situation of the Oedipus complex, it also implies the condition of being dominated, deprived of autonomy by the father’s actions. Consequently, in the Oedipus complex, male anatomy becomes the sign of the domination of what lacks subjectivity. This is because the child’s rejection of its desire for the mother coincides with the belief in the paternal threat of castration. Castration as punishment implies an exclusive right to the mother enforced by violence. Belief in castration implies not only that the mother lacks sexual subjectivity, but also that she is the father’s exclusive property. Consequently, the normal male identification with the father in the resolution of the complex is also the identification of the male gender with a sexual role in which one relates to the other (both to the sexual object and to the sexual rival) through violence and domination.

Both the other’s absence of sexual subjectivity and the subject’s desire for dominion are already implied, as we have seen, in Freud’s understanding of the instinctual relation to the object. However, there it is merely the way in which the subject views the sexual roles generally, not a linkage of these gender roles to gender as such. In the normal resolution of the Oedipus complex, however, these roles are *equated* to masculinity and femininity. The subject’s instinctual relation now appears as objective reality: domination becomes an essential character of the male gender, and being-for-domination becomes an essential character of the female gender.

To the fetishist, on the other hand, the anatomical difference of gender is without significance. Women cannot, on his view, be essentially passive or appropriable. He has not identified with either the father or the mother’s role, nor does the parent that he desires exemplify one side of an oppositional gender relation. Because he disavows castration, he cannot believe that the character of either his desire or the object he desires has any necessary connection to anatomical gender.

Consequently, we have found two advantages implicit in Freudian fetishism. First, the “property problem” is solved. The feminine sexual role (being-for-domination) has disappeared. Second, the attachment

of either sexual role to anatomical gender has been evaded. The possession of a penis does not have any relevance to which role one takes. Nevertheless, the problem of the masculine role of domination is still intact. Given Freud's theory of instinct, the fetishist still desires to dominate the other, since its subjectivity (its independent presence)—though acknowledged—occasions displeasure.

### 6. EMASCULATED FETISHISM

Freud's theory of fetishism also implies a potential solution to the problem of the masculine role, the "domination problem." We have seen that perverse tendencies generally involve an overvaluation of the object that is conditional upon its utility to the sexual aim. However, fetishism involves an overvaluation that is capable of deriving pleasure from a sexual object *even in the absence such utility*. In other words, the fetishist can take pleasure in desire as such; he can form a pleasurable relation to the object even in its independence from his aim, thus obviating the need for its domination.

Freud distinguishes non-pathological and pathological forms of fetishism, but he does not explore their differences in much detail:

The situation only becomes pathological when the longing for the fetish passes beyond the point of being merely a necessary condition attached to the sexual object and actually *takes the place* of the normal aim, and, further, when the fetish becomes detached from a particular individual and becomes the *sole* sexual object. (*Three Essays* 154)

Pathological and non-pathological fetishism are not, as Freud's passing distinction implies, simply different intensities of the same phenomenon. By moving into pathology, fetishism almost turns into its opposite. The original purpose of the fetish is to ensure the safety of the sexual aim from the threat of castration. However, when "longing for the fetish" literally replaces the aim, the original purpose of the fetish is lost entirely. The two forms of fetishism are extremely different, and they have very different consequences for the form of relation taken by the subject to the sexual object.

It is not only the purpose and aim that have changed in the move to pathology. The relation to the

other (the individual who possesses the fetish as phallus) has been given up entirely. The relation to the fetish is no longer an indirect relation to another individual (for example, the mother) via a substitute relation to *her* phallus. It is a relation to *the* (generic) feminine phallus alone, detached from any individual. The indirect sexual relation to the other becomes simply a relation to an object, thus mirroring the autoerotic relation of a child to a part of its own body.

Consequently, the sexual role of the fetish in pathological fetishism also mirrors that of the female in "normal" heterosexuality (and that of the feminine role in other forms of sexuality). In both cases, the subject relates to an appropriated thing—in other words, to a body part. Pathological fetishism might even be considered a variation of normal heterosexuality. We have seen that the fetishist is forced to acknowledge the subjectivity of women and consequently cannot, as he desires, relate to them as property. By taking the feminine phallus as the sexual object, the pathological fetishist evades the problem entirely.<sup>14</sup> In pathological fetishism, a related object or body part is equated to a phallus and the other is literally abandoned, while in masculine heterosexuality the entire female body is equated to a phallus (a passive property-object of pleasure) and the other qua other is abandoned.<sup>15</sup> Freud's own descriptions of "normal" perverse tendencies suggest this connection. Because normal overvaluation "appreciation extends to the whole body of the sexual object" (*Three Essays* 150), the heterosexual subject's interest "can be shifted away from the genitals"—and from the horror of castration that accompanies them—"on to the shape of the body as a whole" (*Three Essays* 156).<sup>16</sup>

This connection of pathological fetishism to the "normal" overvaluation of the sexual object does not, of course, help us with the "domination problem." It even appears to reinstate the "property problem." It does, however, provide us with an interesting reinterpretation of the problem. The problem of the masculine role of domination is that of an autoerotic, and therefore narcissistic, form of libido.<sup>17</sup> The problem of Freud's theory of anaclitic libido is, oddly enough, that anaclitic libido is nowhere to be found.

Nevertheless, this bleak picture of pathological fetishism is also cause for hope. While it is true that the pathological fetishist relates to an object appropriate to

the “feminine” role (ironically, since he must give up women to get such an object), in doing so he also gives up the “masculine” role. This does not at first appear be the case, but upon closer inspection it becomes clear. The masculine role involves overvaluation of the object on the condition of its utility for the sexual aim. The subject can take pleasure in the other as a source of stimulus because the other also provides the removal of that stimulus. But the pathological fetishist has *preserved* the former kind of pleasure and *given up* the latter kind: “the longing for the fetish...actually takes the place of the normal aim” (*Three Essays* 154). Consequently, his pleasure in the other qua other—as source, not removal, of stimulation—*cannot* be conditional upon the other’s utility for the sexual aim. He *must* take pleasure in the other as such, and not as dominated possession.

This fact can easily be overlooked if the fetish is mistakenly equated with the sexual object simply. That is, in fact, Freud’s early view in *Three Essays*, where he says that the fetish “is substituted for the sexual object” (153). However, he rejects this position in the later essays “Fetishism” and “Splitting of the Ego,” stressing that the fetish is a substitute for the other’s *phallus*, and not for the other as such. So although the relation to the fetish is analogous to narcissistic autoeroticism, it is not, strictly speaking, a masculine relation. It cannot be, because the fetishist’s pleasure in that object is neither an active pleasure nor a passive pleasure subordinated to the active sexual aim.<sup>18</sup> He takes pleasure in the increase of stimulus *without* the ultimate aim of the removal of stimulus. Through a direct relation to the fetish, the pathological fetishist is indirectly taking pleasure in the other’s distance, and refusing (by relinquishing the sexual aim) to dominate that other. His pleasure is not, like authentic narcissism, pleasure in his own body. Nor is it, like narcissistic heterosexuality, pleasure in an object treated as one’s own body. It is instead pleasure in longing for what is not possessed. The pleasure taken in the fetish is not pleasure in the fetish as presence, but as desire—as something’s absence. This is already implicit in Freud’s linkage of fetishism to certain traits of normal sexuality:

A certain degree of fetishism is thus habitually present in normal love, especially in those stages of it

in which the normal sexual aim seems unattainable or its fulfillment prevented: “Schaff’ mir ein Halstuch von ihrer Brust, Ein Strumpfband meiner Liebeslust! [Goethe, *Faust*, Part 1, Scene 7].” (*Three Essays* 154)

In pathological fetishism, it is the aim that is replaced by the fetish, not the object. The fetish gives pleasure only in its connection to the human other. The other has not at all been given up as an object of desire, although an achieved sexual relation to the other has been given up. If heterosexuality can be considered displaced autoeroticism (where the other represents a body part), pathological fetishism can be considered displaced object-libido (where a body part/object represents an other). They are analogous in that both involve a relation to an object or body part, but diametrically opposed in the ways in which they relate to the human other.

It is, undoubtedly, this element of seeming autoeroticism in fetishism that leads Freud, as well as common opinion, to assume that fetishism is distinctly masculine in character. But it is a decidedly non-masculine variation of narcissism. Although the fetish is an object without subjectivity that serves only as pleasure for the subject, *the subject does not view the fetish as identical to the other*. The other is, quite to the contrary, a non-dominated subject—so much so that in pathological fetishism, the other is permanently absent, definitively lost.<sup>19</sup> Consequently, the relation of the pathological fetishist to either the fetish or the other is not one conforming to hierarchical masculine and feminine roles.

Obviously, this is a drastic solution to the problem of the dominating relations—the sexual relation has been given up entirely. However, the possibility of pathological fetishism necessitates a reassessment of overvaluation in all of its forms. Freud links overvaluation to the transferal of narcissistic libido to an object. This transference is necessitated by excess libidinal energy that is, in turn, due to the continuous instinctual source of stimulation:

Above all, they [instinctual stimuli] oblige the nervous system to renounce its ideal intention of keeping off stimuli, for they maintain an incessant and unavoidable afflux of stimulation. (“Instincts” 120)

This is how Freud explains the subject's motivation to interact with an external world that can only be experienced antagonistically as a source of increased stimulation. In the case of pathological fetishism, this explanation fails. The fetishist renounces the sexual aim, which occasions the removal of excess stimuli, *but does not renounce the other*, which is a source of *additional* stimuli. He has not only given up satisfaction but increased dissatisfaction. Given Freud's theory of instinct, this is precisely what he should not do. The subject should repress the instinct entirely, regress to autoeroticism, or like the non-pathological fetishist, give up the object but preserve the sexual aim.<sup>20</sup>

The only possible explanation, then, is that the stimuli of external world and other are not necessarily experienced as displeasure. Consequently, Freud's early position on pleasure and instinct must be rejected. The increase of stimulus can be experienced as pleasure—even as more pleasurable than its decrease. Overvaluation is not an *ersatz* pleasure, a “displacement” or “extension” of instinctual value. And this, in turn, requires a reassessment of the role of overvaluation in *all* forms of sexuality. It is possible that non-pathological fetishism and other “perverse” tendencies (including the perverse aspects of “normal” sexuality) do evade to some degree oppositional sexual roles characterized by the domination of property—that subjects can and do relate to the other qua other and qua subject.

## 7. CONCLUDING REMARKS

I have already mentioned that Freud eventually drops the equation of stimulus and displeasure. In fact, he does so before writing the central essays on fetishism, “Fetishism” and “Splitting of the Ego.” However, this change in position did not lead to significant revisions in his theories of overvaluation and object-libido—theories that are, as we have seen, crucial to his understanding of fetishism. He insists, in a way consistent with his abandoned notion of pleasure, upon explaining fetishistic pleasure as a “displacement” of value, a derivative pleasure intended to preserve the sexual aim and necessitated by the disavowal of reality. That the pathological case is incomprehensible on these terms sufficiently demonstrates, I believe, that Freud's earlier understanding of instinct and pleasure is still operative in his later explanations of fetishism.

In addition, his later views preserve the oppositional understanding of gender and sexual roles, as well as the predominately “masculine” character of instinct. For example, despite his suggestion in the 1924 essay “The Economic Problem of Masochism” that pleasure and unpleasure “depend, not on this quantitative factor, but on some characteristic of it which we can only describe as a qualitative one” (160), he nevertheless insists upon explaining “femininity” in terms of a “feminine masochism...based on the primary, erotogenic masochism, on pleasure in pain” (162)—in other words, a connection of femininity to the “death instinct” (See 164). This connection is quite peculiar, since it is precisely the narrow, “masculine” sense of pleasure that makes the erotic bond so difficult to comprehend. In any case, the problem I have dealt with is by no means exclusive to the earlier essays.

Finally, I have already mentioned that Freud attributes a “split-ego” to the fetishist. This split is presumably necessitated by the fetishist's peculiar ability to both disavow and acknowledge the shocking perception of gender difference. However if, as I have claimed, there is no disavowal involved, then the subject's ambivalence—his “affection and hostility in the treatment of the fetish” (“Fetishism” 157)—is left unexplained. My tentative suggestion is that this ambivalence should be interpreted as a rift, not in the ego, but in the qualities of pleasure. The fetishist's incompatible enjoyments of both desire and its extinction may be sufficient to explain his attitude. This would, however, imply that such ambivalence is not exclusive to fetishistic sexuality, and that one pole or the other is suppressed in the taking up of gender roles in other forms of sexuality. Such a view obviously suggests Freud's opposition of life and death instincts, and it could be adapted to fit it—but death would, predictably, fall once again on the feminine side of the castration line. Given that my concern has been precisely the tension between masculinity and Eros and the evasion of the opposition of gender, such a fit would be no fit at all. A split in forms of pleasure, unlike the Freudian opposition of life and death, indicates an essential identity between the two. It would suggest that pleasure, like the fetishist, refuses to be fitted into the Freudian dualistic scheme, and falls outside of life or death, man or woman, and perhaps, good or evil.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Freud preserves this definition of pleasure throughout the early essays, although he does note some exceptions to it. In the next section I will explore his explanations of those exceptions. It should also be noted that he does modify his views of instinct's relation to pleasure in the 1920 work *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, and he explicitly rejects this definition of pleasure in the 1924 essay "The Economic Problem of Masochism." For now, however, my principle concern will be Freud's earlier views of pleasure and instinct.

<sup>2</sup>Although this use of activity and passivity goes against the grain of common usage, it should be remembered that we are dealing with instinct—i.e., activity or passivity in the sense of biological causality, not psychical will. The Freudian version of pleasure and instinct is clearly modeled upon the mechanics of masculine orgasm specifically and of the nervous system generally. Compare "Instincts" 120: "the nervous system is an apparatus which has the function of getting rid of the stimuli that reach it, or of reducing them to the lowest possible level . . . the task—speaking in general terms—of mastering stimuli."

<sup>3</sup>This does not necessarily imply that one subject in the relation must view itself as "feminine" in this negatively defined sense, but instead that any subject that derives pleasure from the relation must view the other as being such. This also does not entail that a subject must view the other as passive object simply, but as passive object only in relation to the sexual aim.

<sup>4</sup>It should be noted that Freud does not use the term "perversion" normatively, and believes perversions can be perfectly compatible with "normality" and "health" (See *Three Essays* 160). It should also be noted that Freud's comment that intermediary relations "should" be traversed rapidly is meant hypothetically, not normatively. Given his theory of instinct, something should be the case, but is not. (See *Three Essays* 150-51: "this sexual overvaluation is something that cannot be easily reconciled with a restriction of the sexual aim to union of the actual genitals.")

<sup>5</sup>This would seem to provide a basis for explaining the ambivalence of anaclitic relationships that Freud goes to such roundabout lengths to explain (via rivalry, the death drive, etc.). If the object is lost, or if it disappoints, the entire ground of its overvaluation is lost as well. Freud's theory gives little motivation for love not to, in such instances, reverse into its opposite.

<sup>6</sup>For a detailed account of "fore-pleasure" and "end-pleasure," see *Three Essays* 208-12.

<sup>7</sup>This form of relation is also in keeping with the predominance of contracted social relations, since value is ensured by an expectation or promise of continued satisfaction. In one sense, it could be said that the subject does not take pleasure in desire as such, since it can only take pleasure in the absence of satisfaction given the guarantee of its eventual presence. In another sense, it could be said that overvaluation *is* pleasure in desire, but only on the condition that it is a desire without risk. (All of this, of course, implies a utilitarian model of social relations in which the object is means not end—the libidinal form of "good business sense.")

<sup>8</sup>These two problems are ground of the gender roles in their most negative form. The "domination problem" establishes the character of the masculine relation to the feminine, and the "property problem" establishes the masculine interpretation of femininity. The latter tendency reinforces the former by implying that domination is perfectly appropriate to the kind of being a woman is. Also note that both are linked to the problem of overvaluation. The domination problem implies that overvaluation does not go far enough—the other's subjectivity is not valued. The property problem implies that overvaluation goes too far. Because overvaluation allows the other to be reduced in its entirety to pleasure-value, the other's subjectivity is not even recognized, let alone valued.

<sup>9</sup>I will explore in a later section the specific differences and consequences of pathological and non-pathological fetishism. For now, I will only be dealing with non-pathological fetishism.

<sup>10</sup>See, for example "Fetishism" 153, "Female Sexuality" 229, and "Some Consequences" 253.

<sup>11</sup>Because Freud has not mentioned or explored the possibility of female fetishism, I will assume a masculine subject in my discussion of Freudian fetishism.

<sup>12</sup>It should, of course, be remembered that only part of the fetishist's "split-ego" believes this. For now I will deal only with what is specific to fetishist. I will discuss Freud's notion of the split-ego at a later point.

<sup>13</sup>In Freud's theory of feminine sexuality, the belief in castration actually leads (like a self-fulfilling prophecy) to a kind of self-imposed castration. The belief in sexual incompleteness is followed, he claims, by a "wave of repression which at puberty will do away with a large amount of the girl's masculine sexuality in order to make room for the development of her femininity" ("Some Consequences" 255).

<sup>14</sup>One might, then, take Freud's phrase "detached from a particular individual" quite seriously, and suggest that the pathological fetishist has solved the problem of the other's subjectivity by *castrating* her. Although the other qua subject is inappropriate, the generic feminine phallus (e.g., *anyone's* foot, *anyone's* clothing) is not. This would seem to be well illustrated in its extreme form by Freud's example of the *coupeur de nattes*, who shows a "need to carry out the castration which he disavows" ("Fetishism" 157). Although Freud relates this to the "split-ego" of disavowal and avowal, I have rejected Freud's claim of such a "disavowal." I suggest an alternate interpretation of the "split-ego" below in the concluding section.

<sup>15</sup>These two relations differ crucially, however, because in the former the subject relates to the feminine phallus (to the *other's* phallus), whereas in the latter the subject relates to woman *as phallus* (to his own phallus). I discuss this very important difference in more detail below.

<sup>16</sup>Consequently, it might be suggested that there simply is no such thing as a non-fetishistic form of sexuality. "Normal" heterosexuality might stand at one end of overvaluation and non-pathological fetishism at the other. The former would be, contrary to Freud's claim, an *absence* of overvaluation of the sexual object, since

what is external to the subject is valued only as a phallus, as a part of the subject's own body. (It *is* overvaluation but *not* of an external object—i.e., it is misplaced narcissistic libido, not anaclitic libido.) In the latter, on the contrary, overvaluation is of the other qua other, since its subjectivity is acknowledged—even if, as Freud's theory implies, it wishes to dominate that other. Whether he is correct on this point remains to be seen.

<sup>17</sup>And perhaps, consequently, the problem of the feminine role of property is a problem of an anaclitic libido bereft of all narcissism. Since my central concern has been the masculine view of the feminine role, I won't pursue this in detail. I will suggest, however, that identification with the feminine role, an identification with castration, implies valuing the sexual object as subject at the expense of one's own subjectivity. So it would certainly not be narcissistic. The idea that femininity is anaclitic and masculinity narcissistic is attractive—if only because it flies in the face of Freud's opposite claim (Compare "Narcissism" 88).

<sup>18</sup>Here we have the crucial difference, mentioned above, between the relation to the feminine phallus and to the female as phallus. In the latter case, far from taking a masculine role, the subject is thoroughly passive. The feminine phallus is, after all, the locus of the other's subjectivity, a subjectivity to which the pathological fetishist submits without the compensation of the active sexual aim.

<sup>19</sup>Pathological fetishism might, for this reason, be compared to permanent mourning—despair over the very possibility of a relation.

<sup>20</sup>It should be emphasized that Freud cannot explain pathological fetishism by appealing to an obstacle to the sexual aim. Given his claim that the fetish substitutes for the penis, the threat of castration has been evaded. Consequently, there is no reason for the pathological fetishist to renounce the aim—it can, at the least, be satisfied auto-erotically.

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