

Beyond the Death-Drive: Psychoanalysis and Social Critique

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The belief in an endemic human tendency to aggression is often understood to spell out a threshold for the hopes of liberatory politics. If humans are inherently violent regardless of their historical circumstances, there seems to be limited use in transforming these circumstances. Not only in philosophical literature, but in popular discourse as well, it is common to draw on *Civilization and Its Discontents*' Hobbesian assertion that *Homo homini lupus* ["man is a wolf to man"], and to follow the anti-utopian political implications Sigmund Freud draws from this "indestructible feature of human nature."¹ As Jean Laplanche notes in a commentary on this tendency: "In the general thought of cultured people, the death-drive becomes a useful ideological theme."² If the death-drive serves an ideological function, it partially involves the way such a drive blocks or limits thought aiming to fundamentally change society.

However, the anti-utopian use of the death-drive is not limited to popular social and political thought, nor to a more general belief in an innate human proclivity to aggression. As we will see, the roots of such an ideological function are also at play in metapsychological attempts to separate the psychoanalysis of the drive from social and political history. In coming to terms with this separation, our aim is to explore the relationship between the metapsychological concept of the drive and the disavowal of utopia in social and political analysis. While bringing together

¹ Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, trans. James Strachey (New York: W.W. Norton, 2010 [1930]), 98.

² Jean Laplanche, "The So-Called 'Death Drive': A Sexual Drive," *British Journal of Psychotherapy* 20, no. 4 (2004): 455-471, 462.

these two areas of concern is not an easy endeavor, it is our conviction that reading the drive theory in the light of socio-political critique allows for a deeper understanding of its philosophical meaning.³ Accordingly, this paper focuses on an investigation of the drive theory that makes room for a critical function of utopia, understood not as a straightforward “fulfillment” of the drives, but rather as a possibility of their maturation, even in adverse socio-political and cultural conditions. In our view, the differentiation that ultimately produces the opposition between *Eros* and *Thanatos* in Freud is a site of philosophical reflection not only on the problematic function of the death-drive, but also on the – socially conditioned – possibility of human life as such. Consequently, the ambivalences and tensions found within Freud’s shifting articulations of the drive theory provide resources for rethinking human sociality beyond the bounds of Freud’s own social and political pessimism.

Following the development of Freud’s drive theory, the first two sections will show how the drive’s status as a “concept on the borderline between the mental and the physical”⁴ generates a conceptual ambiguity that becomes, through the course of its elaboration, a timeless metaphysical opposition of *Eros* and *Thanatos*. The third section will argue that Adrian Johnston’s transcendental strategy for accommodating the ambiguity of the drive repeats the Freudian gesture of closing metapsychology off from historical change. Our next section will explore alternative ways to historicize the drive, focusing on Theodor Adorno’s dialectical understanding of the drive conflict, in which the separation between *psyche* and society is understood as an ideology masking society’s nonidentity with itself. The final section will explore the relationship between the drives

³ We understand critique as a process of unfolding and clarifying the conditions of possibility and the finalities at stake in a given experience. As Jean Laplanche notices, a critical investigation cannot fail to pose problems of genesis. See: Jean Laplanche, *Life and Death in Psychoanalysis*, trans. Jeffrey Mehlman (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), 129.

⁴ Sigmund Freud, “Drives and Their Fates,” trans. Graham Frankland, in *The Unconscious*, ed. Adam Phillips (New York: Penguin, 2005 [1915]): 13-31, 16.

and social emancipation through a further investigation of Freud's theory of repression and sublimation. In sublimation – which we interpret as the social maturation of partial drives – the utopian desire for a livable life is expressed as a critical project.

1. The Life of the Drives

In his 1915 essay, “The Unconscious,” Freud describes metapsychology as an all-encompassing project in which the various ways of understanding psychic phenomena developed through years of clinical work are brought together. Each psychic act, according to Freud, can be grasped in terms of its dynamic, topographic, and economic dimensions. The first aspect understands psychic phenomena as stages in a process of historical development, the second understands them as interactions happening among the mind's different systems, and the third sees them as attempts to regulate variable quantities of psychic energy. Grasping a phenomenon simultaneously in dynamic, topographic, and economic terms produces its own perspective – “the culmination of all psychological investigation” – which is proper to metapsychology.⁵ However, since the metapsychological perspective incorporates various theorizations and empirical investigations, Freud describes it as an unfinished project.⁶

Freud describes the same project from the standpoint of the production of its concepts in “Drives and Their Fates.” Even when a field is well-established and seems capable of providing certain knowledge of its domain of study, as well as a progressively broader applicability of its concepts, he writes, “the advance of knowledge will brook no rigidity here. As the example of physics strikingly demonstrates, even those ‘basic concepts’ firmly established in the form of

⁵ Sigmund Freud, “The Unconscious,” trans. Graham Frankland, in *The Unconscious*, ed. Adam Phillips (New York: Penguin, 2005 [1915]): 47-85, 64.

⁶ “Given the present state of our knowledge, we can safely say that [a metapsychological account] will prove possible only in a few isolated areas.” Freud, “The Unconscious,” 64.

definitions are constantly being substantially revised.”⁷ The fact that basic phenomena in psychology can be understood according to their dynamic, topographic, or economic aspects, attests to psychoanalysis’ flexible strategy for accommodating this ambiguity. The metapsychological attempt to unite these various aspects will always be open to revision, as an inflexible definition of its basic terms would render it unable to incorporate new discoveries.

In “Drives and Their Fates,” the drive is introduced as a liminal concept between the biological organism and the psyche. More precisely, the drive is “the psychic representative of stimuli flowing into the psyche from inside the body, or the degree of workload imposed on the psyche as a result of its relation to the body.”⁸ Initially differentiating the drive from a physiological stimulus or instinct, Freud notes that drive excitations [*Triebreize*] originate within the living organism,⁹ being transmitted to the psyche through the mediation of a “representative.” The drive is not manifested through a momentary impact, but rather exerts a constant pressure on the organism. In other words, drives ought to be understood as forces constantly pushing towards change and development. These factors combine to complicate the biological assumption of purposiveness provisionally adopted to understand the organism’s relationship to stimuli or excitations. If we view the organism’s function as the mastery of stimuli, and we further recognize the presence of drive excitations exerting a constant pressure from within the organism, then the psychological concept of the drive introduces great variability into the merely physiological or biological understanding of the organism itself:

External stimuli set the organism a single task, evasion; this is accomplished by muscle movements, one of which eventually achieves the aim and, being the most

⁷ Freud, “Drives and Their Fates,” 13-14.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 16.

⁹ “First, a drive stimulus emanates not from the outside world, but from inside the organism itself. For this reason it affects the psyche differently and different actions are needed to remove it.” *Ibid.*, 14.

expedient, goes on to become an hereditary disposition. Drive stimuli, emanating from the organism, cannot be dealt with by this mechanism. They therefore make much greater demands on the nervous system, causing it to undertake intricate, convoluted activities that alter the outside world sufficiently for it to provide satisfaction to the inner source of stimulation; above all, they force the nervous system to renounce its ideal intention of avoiding stimuli because they supply a constant, inescapable flow of stimulation.¹⁰

While the drive originates in the biological functioning of the organism, the demands it places on the nervous system are here understood to interrupt this functioning.¹¹ In one way, this ambiguity opposes the ontogenetic temporality pertaining to the life of the individual, through which we can articulate changes in the drives throughout each individual's life, to the phylogenetic temporality relating to the evolution of the species, through which we can trace the biological sources of the drive impulse. The drive itself, falling between these two levels, seems to combine elements from the life of the individual organism with those emanating from the development of the species. But we can also consider this ambiguity as pertaining to the introduction of a new dimension within the system of our biological needs, which opens them up to a distinct temporality of sexual fantasy understood as a sort of inner bodily reflexivity that is discovered in relationship with another

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 15-16.

¹¹ This aligns with the way Freud would characterize psychoanalysis' relationship to biology in the 1914 Preface to the Third Edition of the *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*. In this Preface, Freud considers drives to be related to the life of the human as a biological organism, but nevertheless aims to keep the nature of this relation open, by refraining from bringing biological assumptions into the analysis. Rather than understanding psychological reality in terms of biological findings, he writes in his 1914 Preface to the Third Edition that his aim is to "discover how far psychological investigation can throw light upon the biology of the sexual life of man." Sigmund Freud, *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, trans. James Strachey, in *The Standard Edition of the Works of Sigmund Freud, Vol. VII (1901-1905)*, ed. James Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press, 1953 [1905]): 125-243, 130.

human being (the parent or the caregiver). Here, a pole of otherness has to be highlighted as a distinctive feature of the drive, which also clearly determines its social orientation.¹²

Derived from Freud's clinical work, the four drive fates listed in "Drives and Their Fates" include: (i) reversal into its opposite, (ii) turning back on the self, (iii) repression, and (iv) sublimation.¹³ Freud treats the first two fates which correspond, respectively, to changes in the drive's aims and objects, illustrated by a discussion on the ambivalent pairings sadism-masochism and voyeurism-exhibitionism.¹⁴ We can see a case of the drive's reversion to its opposite through the transformation from voyeurism to exhibitionism, or from sadism to masochism, through which the aim of the drive – a desire to look, the desire to hurt – is reversed into a desire to be looked at, or to be hurt. When drives turn in on themselves, to contrast, they apply the same aim (to hurt, to look) to a different direction – in this case, turning from an external object to the self. These two fates thus seem to be complementary, with the latter highlighting a reflexivity of the drive that we will examine further below.

The highly variable nature of the drives appears here as a holdover from Freud's earlier explorations of the drive theory in the *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, where drives are presented as forces exerting pressure on psychic life, but which transform in time, adopting new aims and attachments.¹⁵ This variability introduces the possibility of sexual deviance and perversion, but is also what allows for sexual development over time. The "normal" genital organization of sexuality is understood as the limited end-result of a broader process of development leading through earlier "pregenital" stages, involving oscillations and regressions.¹⁶

¹² See: Jean Laplanche, "The Drive and its Source-Object: its Fate in the Transference" in *Essays on Otherness*, (London: Routledge, 1999 [1992]): 120-135.

¹³ Freud, "Drives and Their Fates," 20.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 21.

¹⁵ Freud, *Three Essays*, 135-36.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 197-198.

According to the later metapsychological perspective, drives have both a highly variable aspect and a relatively invariable one. From the way Freud characterizes the source and pressure exerted by the drive, it seems that the part resisting variation pertains to the bodily elements of the drive inherited through the development of the species. Nevertheless, we can speak of a “life of the drives” because these forces in psychic life have a strong developmental component – whether we understand this in terms of the four possible drive fates listed in the 1915 essay, or in terms of the stages of development outlined in the *Three Essays*. When later stages are reached, or when the sexual drives are resolved to new fates, parts of the previous stages or moments inevitably remain – which, as we will see, is an important aspect of the problem we tackle in the following sections.

2. The Drive Fates between *Eros* and *Thanatos*

Since the first metapsychological sketches of the drive theory, Freud is not as concerned with drives *as such*, as he is with their *fates* [*Tribschicksale*], in which the differentiation between progressive and regressive drives should be sought. With the publication of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* in 1920, a stronger division is introduced between the drives oriented towards life and those oriented towards death. What had been presented in the 1914 essay “On the Introduction of Narcissism” as a division between conservative ego-drives and progressive sexual- or object-drives¹⁷ is here radicalized into an antagonism between *Thanatos* and *Eros*. Let us note from the beginning that this opposition is a twisted one, as the opposite of *Eros* are discord, hunger or hatred, and the opposite of *Thanatos* is life. We would like to complicate this conceptual twist in

¹⁷ See: Sigmund Freud, “On the Introduction of Narcissism,” trans. John Reddick, in *The Penguin Freud Reader*, ed. Adam Phillips, 358-390, (New York: Penguin, 2006 [1914]): 358-390, 362ff.

the direction of a psychoanalysis of human life that is challenged by the regressive tendency of the death-drive.

The main problem – noticed by several commentators¹⁸ – with the new terminological distinction adopted in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* is related to the ambiguous nature of the death-drive, which is understood both as a “Nirvana principle” of a total reduction of tension and as a homeostatic constancy; as a peaceful absence of excitation and as an arousal of aggression; as an irrepressible tendency to unpleasure and self-destructiveness, and as the pleasure of repetition. While clarifying these contradictions is a challenging task, it appears that the death-drive is not a different kind of drive that simply disobeys the pleasure principle, but rather a tendency present in the life of all drives,¹⁹ each time they engage in regressive/conservative movements and compulsive repetitions, whether they seek for self-disintegration, for restaging former stages of their history, or for cultivating homeostatic constancies that allow for a different take on former traumatic events. Indeed, in Freud’s own words, the compulsion to repeat initially associated with the death-drive is “a universal attribute of drives” related to “a powerful tendency inherent in every living organism to restore a prior state,” and “a kind of organic elasticity.”²⁰

However, this universality becomes problematic as soon as we consider the variety of ends pursued by the compulsion to repeat: if its goal is mere self-disintegration, it conflicts with the attempt to revisit past traumatic episodes in order to make available a more accurate representation of the danger to which one is exposed; and if the goal of such a regression is to restage former moments of development, it means that it can no longer be associated with a mere self-dissolution.

¹⁸ See: Daniel Lagache, “Situation de l’agressivité,” *Bulletin de Psychologie* (1961): 99-112. See also Jean Laplanche, *Life and Death in Psychoanalysis*, 108 ff.; Stéphane Haber, *Freud et la théorie sociale* (Paris: La Dispute, 2012), 50 ff.

¹⁹ “The death drive is the soul of every drive, the most driving aspect of the drive.” Jean Laplanche, *Problématiques III: La sublimation* (Paris: PUF, 2008 [1980]), 215.

²⁰ Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, trans. John Reddick, in *The Penguin Freud Reader*, ed. Adam Phillips (New York: Penguin, 2006 [1920]): 132-195, 64-65.

Moreover, the pleasure principle itself is displaced from its initial function when it is engaged in compulsory repetition. While Freud defines pleasure as a discharge of free-flowing energy that comes “from the inner depths of the body,”²¹ he also relates it to an “annexing process” of this energy as it aligns with the reality principle.²² Hence, on one side, we have an energy that is untamed and unbound, looking for release through primary processes such as dreams and unconscious fantasies, while on the other side, we have an energy that is bound to objects through secondary conscious processes.²³ However, at a strictly economic level of analysis, it is not easy to understand how these energies pass into one another and relate to each other over time.

Jean Laplanche describes this relationship with the help of the concept of “leaning-on” (or propping), which translates the French term “*étayage*” and the German term “*Anlehnung*”: the free-flowing energy “leans on” the energy that is initially bound through vital functions of the body, bringing forth an “erotic body” out of the biological body, and a temporality that cannot be superimposed on the biological one. This process, in which the vital functions detach themselves from their object and return to themselves by introjecting an “original phantasm [*ursprüngliche Phantasie*],”²⁴ is for Laplanche none other than the genesis of the drive as such. Interestingly, this return to oneself that begins in auto-eroticism is also related to a reflexive return of hetero-aggressivity (sadism) into auto-aggression (masochism), grounding both in an original masochism.²⁵ The eroticization of one’s body is thus understood as a process not restricted to genital sexuality, encompassing a complex expressivity of our humanity that is forever risky and

²¹ *Ibid.*, 155

²² *Ibid.*, 163

²³ From Freud’s own account, this economic distinction is a reworking of Breuer’s neurological distinction between quiescent energy and kinetic energy. However, as Jean Laplanche has shown, Freud is not merely inheriting Breuer’s perspective, but rather modifying it, with a view on Helmholtz’s theory of free-flowing energy and bound energy. See Jean Laplanche, *Life and Death in Psychoanalysis*, 117ff.

²⁴ See: Jean Laplanche, *Life and Death in Psychoanalysis*, 88ff.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, chap. 5.

unsettled.²⁶ At the same time, “leaning-on” does refer to sexuality as a dimension of our psychic life that emerges from biologic needs; it is an original bodily reflexivity that allows for new sources of gratification and attachment. Therefore, the homeostatic goal of pleasure has to be understood in light of the risk and the indetermination entailed by this “phantasmatic” origin of the drive.

From this perspective, pleasure is nothing else than the phantasmatic expression of bodily vital necessities which are “translated” and continuously transformed throughout one’s life-history. Yet this transformation also entails moments of tension and mutual inhibition between the “erotic body” and the “animal body,” as they challenge each other. At stake in the process of leaning-on is a certain human freedom from vital necessity, which is at the same time a source of danger posed to the constancy of the living organism. At an economic level, pleasure is a source of stability only inasmuch as it allows for transitional inscriptions of the free-flowing energy into the already existing relations in which psychic energy is invested (bound energy). The normative system that regulates psychic energy is thus necessarily disturbed by inputs of “demonic” free-flowing energy, without which it is probably destined to diminish and die. However, if this free-flowing energy exceeds the organism’s ability to bind it, it puts the body itself at risk by compromising its stability. A subtle dialectic seems to be responsible for keeping us alive, then, as an interaction between excessive and destructive free-flowing energy and annexed energy that cannot maintain itself as such over time.

This economic problem is reflected in the metapsychological differentiation of the drives, which also takes its dynamic and topographic aspects into account. However, each time the differentiation of the drives is rearticulated by Freud, a slight displacement seems to be at work, pushing *Eros* to the side of *Thanatos*, and *Thanatos* into the heart of *Eros*. The relationship between

²⁶ See also: Christophe Dejours, *Le corps, d’abord* (Paris: Payot, 2001); *Les dissidences du corps* (Paris: Payot, 2017).

the two sequences connecting sexual drives with disruptive discharges of free-flowing energy manifested mainly in primary unconscious processes, on the one hand, and connecting ego-drives with bound energy in secondary conscious processes, on the other hand, is thus inverted in such a way that we ultimately find *Eros* as a binding force that is related to the ego, and *Thanatos* as a disruptive drive.²⁷ While this new alignment is incompatible with the argument of Freud's earlier texts, it is only under its reign that death can be considered as "the motor of sexual life"²⁸ and the death-drive as a tendency in all drives. The ambiguity of leaning-on complicates the role of life as related to both sexual drives and deadly attachments, or to disruption and unification.

In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud attempts to clarify the double dimension of pleasure – destructive discharge and homeostasis – through a speculative consideration of the compulsion to repeat as older than the pleasure principle, and as rooted in the life of every organism. From the example of "living organisms in their simplest possible form as an undifferentiated vesicle of irritable matter,"²⁹ Freud describes the differentiation that must develop between the organism's inner and outer layers, with the latter forming a shield protecting the inside from stimulation.³⁰ Since excitations arising from within the inside of the organism do not have to pass through such a protective layer, however, the organism would have to bind this inner energy, investing it with libido in order to keep the intrusion from overwhelming or destroying it. In order for the pleasure principle to work, the organism must have enough of a structure to bind the energy flowing from within and without. But in order to attain such a structure, it seems that another principle must be relied on, one based not on maintaining a balance of pleasure and pain, but on

²⁷ Jean Laplanche refers to a *chiasm* in order to describe this awkward intertwining of the drives. Laplanche, *Life and Death in Psychoanalysis*, 124.

²⁸ Patricia Gherovici, *Transgender Psychoanalysis: A Lacanian Perspective on Sexual Difference* (London: Routledge, 2017), 165.

²⁹ Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, 153.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 154.

an attempt to return to an earlier state. In this self-preserving function, Freud sees a task that goes on “independently of [the pleasure principle] and to some extent quite heedless of it.”³¹

The regressive tendency of the drive in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* is expanded to a metaphysical opposition in later works that see the violence associated with “instincts” as an immediate feature of human nature. While in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud still seems to have faith in the drives’ ability to find new aims and objects, the later works find Freud downplaying their capacity for development. This is clearest in *Civilization and Its Discontents*. While the *Eros-Thanatos* opposition had been tentatively conjectured in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, as a modification of the earlier distinction between the sexual drives and the ego drives,³² here it is expressed as a metaphysical difference underlying the “common knowledge” and “self-evident” fact of the predominance of human aggression.³³ *Eros* is now a civilizational principle “combining single human individuals, and after that families, then races, peoples, and nations, into one great unity, the unity of mankind.”³⁴ The death-drive, too, is at once “an original, self-subsisting, instinctual disposition in man” and an irreducible social and political reality opposing the historical aims of *Eros*.³⁵ The Hobbesian war of all against all is here elevated to a metaphysical principle whose struggle with *Eros* describes the evolution of civilization itself.

One result of this rigidified opposition is that aggression becomes “an indestructible feature of human nature,” working on ontogenetic and phylogenetic timescales.³⁶ This is significant, from one side, because it appears to make the “life of the drives” more expansive, encompassing all of human history. At the same time, however, the conjecture of an inborn aggressive drive also greatly

³¹ *Ibid.*, 163.

³² *Ibid.*, 191-92, n. 28; see also: Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, chap. 6.

³³ Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, 103.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 111.

³⁵ “[M]an’s natural aggressive drive, the hostility of each against all and of all against each, opposes this programme of civilization.” *Ibid.*, 110-111.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 98.

limits the developmental picture of Freud's earlier drive theory. Freud rejects any substantive hope in the transformation of psychic life through social and political means, since human civilization is integrated through the work of a decadent repressive apparatus. Since the tendency to aggression is inborn and "indestructible," the reorganization of society will "have in no way altered the differences in power and influence which are misused by aggressiveness, nor have... altered anything in its nature."³⁷ Most striking here is the way that such a reflection eliminates the historical character of the drives. The highly variable nature of the drive fates exhibited in the early metapsychology is displaced in favor of a metaphysical opposition between *Eros* and *Thanatos*. In this sense, the chain of speculations begun in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* and leading to *Civilization and Its Discontents* introduces a fatalism into the drive theory at odds with the earlier, more robust conception of the *Tribschicksale*.

3. Fatalism Repeated: A Metapsychology of Split Drives

We find a radicalization of this problem in Adrian Johnston's interpretation of Freud's drive theory, which outlines a conflict between two different paradigms of temporality found in Freud's work: a deterministic paradigm according to which the past overdetermines the present, and an emancipatory paradigm that allows for transformation. The belief that the symptoms of present mental life have their origins in earlier conflicts and stages of development makes use of the first temporal model. In other parts of his work, however, Freud recognizes that individuals can transform their relationship to the past, as for example when he reflects on deferred action, on sublimation and *Nachträglichkeit*, in the light of which new orientations and attachments can retroactively rewrite old conflicts or cast them anew. Neither of these paradigms alone can provide

³⁷ *Ibid.*

a satisfying guide to metapsychology. Adopting a linear and deterministic idea of time threatens to erase analysis' capacity to liberate analysands from past traumas, while an exclusively retroactive and hermeneutic understanding of time would eliminate the importance of the basic concepts of psychoanalysis – “the unconscious, repetition, transference, and the drive.”³⁸

Johnston's answer to this difficulty is to understand the apparently opposed conceptions of time as opposed moments found within every drive. Accordingly, each drive has an “axis of iteration” that strives insatiably to return to past states. This axis pertains to the inner source of the drive and the pressure it exerts on the mental system.³⁹ But in dealing with the continuous pressure exerted by the drive, the psyche supplies libidinal investments which are necessarily incompatible with the original state the drive strives to restore. Johnston sees this process as the work of a temporally distinct “axis of alteration.”⁴⁰ Drives themselves are thus temporally complex entities, rather than “some internal biological reality welling up from the chaotic depths of the id.”⁴¹ Johnston writes: “*Trieb* is the conceptual, metapsychological embodiment of an unsuccessful mediation between a nonhistoricized, quasi-somatic source... and a temporalized realm of both objectival representations and historically alterable aims.”⁴² The generic ambivalence of the drive we noticed in the first section is thus turned into a fundamental feature of each drive, with the variable aspect pertaining to the axis of alteration, and the invariable aspect pertaining to the aspect of iteration. The frustration that arises from the inability to fulfill the demands of the drive stems from the fact that this entity's atemporal striving for an “eternal return” must realize itself in

³⁸ Adrian Johnston, *Time Driven: Metapsychology and the Splitting of the Drive* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2005), 141.

³⁹ “The axis of iteration consists of the indefinitely iterated ‘demand for work’ impinging upon the representational level of the psychical apparatus. Freud portrays the drive-source as a quasi-somatic force, whereas the drive-pressure is identified as the negative affect (anxiety and/or various states of discomfort) accompanying the source.” *Ibid.*, 150. Johnston quotes Freud's characterization of drive pressure in: Freud, “Drives and Their Fates,” 16.

⁴⁰ See Johnston, *Time Driven*, §25, as well as Chapters 9 and 10 for further discussions on these two drive axes.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 143.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 167.

concrete historical conditions, adopting real objects and aims that necessarily fall short of the demand issuing from the axis of iteration.⁴³

In his transcendental radicalization of Freud's dualism of *Eros* and *Thanatos*,⁴⁴ Johnston likens the atemporal axis of iteration and the temporal axis of alteration to the antinomy of the noumenon and phenomenon in Kant's critical philosophy.⁴⁵ Unlike Kant, however, who conceived of antinomies as incompatible *theoretical positions* with equal logical justification, Johnston argues – with Hegel – that the antinomy between iteration and alteration designates *a division within reality itself*.⁴⁶ He writes: “The unthematized antinomies arising from Freud's various presentations of drive theory are not mere contradictions within the conceptual-discursive fabric of psychoanalytic reason, but are reflective of the primordial antagonism of *Trieb an sich*.”⁴⁷ While Johnston's initial intervention is metaphysically deflationary, in the sense that it does away with the idea of drives as permanently opposed forces playing out on all levels of human life, he still posits the internal division of the drive as a truth outstripping the bounds of all possible experience.

⁴³ “... Since the representational components of the axis of alteration are subject to modification by temporal factors, a pure, undiluted repetition of the initial satisfaction sought by the axis of iteration is, strictly speaking, impossible.” *Ibid.*, 151.

⁴⁴ This transcendental focus means that the question of the number and type of drives has limited relevance for Johnston's project: “If metapsychology contains the conceptual possibility conditions for the psychoanalytic field, then an investigation into the inherent structural organization of *Trieb* has procedural priority over proclamations about specific traits and subdivisions of this fundamental concept.” *Ibid.*, 154.

⁴⁵ “These two axes are rightly analogous to the Kantian distinction between the noumenal and the phenomenological as utilized in his exposition of why self-consciousness is shaped by its own internal conditions of (im)possibility: Fully transparent self-consciousness is impossible, in Kant's view, because the timeless subject, as the set of transcendental conditions making all determinate acts of consciousness possible, only ever recovers itself through the necessary distortion imposed upon it by a spatio-temporal medium, namely, phenomenal inner sense as the medium of reflective consciousness.” *Ibid.*, 150.

⁴⁶ “... Kant stopped short at the merely negative result of the unknowability of the in-itself of things and did not press on to the true and positive significance of the antinomies. The true and positive significance of the antinomies consists in general in this: that everything actual contains with itself opposite determinations, and that therefore knowing and, more specifically, comprehending an object means nothing more or less than becoming conscious of it as a unity of oppositions.” G.W.F. Hegel, *Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences in Basic Outline, Part I: Science of Logic*, trans. Klaus Brinkmann and Daniel O. Dahlstrom (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 94-95, §48.

⁴⁷ Johnston, *Time Driven*, 230-31.

If the introduction of temporal heterogeneity into the structure of the drive productively questions Freud's attempts to base the drive theory on a relatively invariant biological basis in his later work, a metaphysical remainder seems to lead to the repetition of the socio-historical fatalism that we observed at the close of the last section. This is clearest when the antagonism of the drives is presented as the source of a continuous frustration: "Drive is nothing other than an intrinsic dysfunctionality, a perpetual margin of dissatisfaction, generated by an irresolvable difference between the axis of iteration's repetitious (a)temporality and the axis of alteration's dialectical temporality."⁴⁸ Conceived as the site of interaction between time and eternity, or life and death, the drive becomes a "locus of permanent incompatibility."⁴⁹ Furthermore, the conflict within the drive – as a "primordial antagonism of *Trieb an sich*" – is an ineliminable part of human nature. While this temporal structure of drives introduces an opposition between an ahistorical axis and a temporally variable axis – in this sense "temporalizing the drive" – the conflict between these axes also involves an equal and opposite "detemporalizing" movement. Psychic life is bound to be eternally frustrating, and this fact no longer expresses a productive limitation of our theoretical capacities, but an unassailable truth that must henceforth condition all theories.

This repetition of Freud's historical fatalism has its most directly political consequences in Johnston's reading of the "Freudo-Marxist" tradition, and particularly of Herbert Marcuse's idealization of the possibility of a non-repressive condition outside of the confines of contemporary civilization. Marcuse introduces a utopian element into psychological theorizing since he holds that the drives can be fulfilled in principle. But this latter assumption is unwarranted: "Satisfaction of the drives is impossible, since it is always-already prohibited by the inherent structuration of

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 231.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

each and every drive.”⁵⁰ The hope for a form of social and political organization substantially decreasing the share of psychological suffering borne by its members is therefore a naïve wish.⁵¹ The ineradicable and ahistorical tension between the two sides of every drive means that attempts such as Marcuse’s deny reality, rather than working within its well-established bounds. For this reason, Johnston describes Freudo-Marxism as “utopianism licensed by an ignorance of the nonhistoricized, self-defeating nature of *Trieb*,” continuing that: “Even if prohibitions specific to a particular social arrangement like capitalism are lifted, the achievement of a full satisfaction through a messianically anticipated ‘living out of the drives’ in an alternative social system yet-to-come is a fantasy veiling the eternally necessary failure of the drives.”⁵² While Marcuse is here grouped with Freud, Johnston clearly shares something of Freud’s later resignation in the face of an eternal conflict of the drives. Whether this conflict takes place between metaphysically distinct principles or within each drive seems less important than the way in which its eternal nature renders it invulnerable to social and political change.

Here we face the paradox of a transcendental metapsychology that introduces temporal heterogeneity as an inner quality of psychological concepts, but simultaneously seals these concepts themselves off from temporal change. The dialectic in this case has a stopping point, at the dividing line between metapsychology and history. The attempt to mix Kant and Hegel – utilizing Kant’s critical prohibition on constitutive ideas of pure reason on the one hand but purporting to speak about the things themselves on the other; adopting Hegel’s critique of Kantian formalism but rejecting the fundamental dynamism of his dialectic – serves ultimately to establish

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 248.

⁵¹ “If ‘external’ constraints are a residual by-product of the antagonism within all drives, then some form of Freudian ‘civilization,’ as a prohibitory *Umwelt* in whatever particular forms, will always be necessary so as to sustain the fantasy of full satisfaction, regardless of whether this fantasy is of a Freudian past that is always-already lost or of a Marxist future endlessly *à venir*.” *Ibid.*, 254.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 154-155.

metapsychology as an independent undertaking capable of describing things in themselves. While it is true that Johnston locates the possibility of freedom in his thesis of an eternally frustrated drive, since its negativity implies that nature has no eternally binding plans for humanity,⁵³ it also seems true that this account encloses frustration and psychic suffering within an individualistic shell invulnerable to the movement of history.

4. The Dialectic of Nature and History

The historical fatalism we outlined at the end of the second section reaches its most developed expression in Johnston's division between the quasi-somatic compulsion to repeat found in the axis of iteration and the historically variable and symbolically mediated play of aims and objects found in the axis of alteration. Whereas this account sees the drive as a mixture of the ancient and the contemporary, the conflict internal to it is not only an ancient remnant of evolutionary history, but eternal and ahistorical. This is another way to say that the tension between human connection and aggression, between life and death, is not historically mediated, as Freud's early, open-ended conception of the drive fates is collapsed into a single fate: eternal conflict and frustration. While understanding the life of the drives must take account of their complicated temporal character, it is unclear why their inner temporality should be divorced from social and political history. We can begin to see the possibility of a different approach to the drive theory by critiquing this ahistorical reduction.

Such an approach is the focus of Theodor Adorno's reflections on metapsychology. Adorno draws on the dialectic of nature and history outlined in his early essay titled "The Idea of Natural-

⁵³ "Since drives are essentially dysfunctional, subjects are able to act otherwise than as would be dictated by instinctually compelled pursuits of gratification, satisfaction, and pleasure. In fact, subjects are forced to be free, since, for such beings, the mandate of nature is forever missing." *Ibid.*, 340.

History,” in which he levels a critique of any attempts to one-sidedly understand nature on the basis of history, or historical change on the basis of nature, arguing instead in favor of a dialectical account “pushing these concepts to a point where they are mediated in their apparent difference.”⁵⁴ For Adorno, neither the apparent permanence of nature nor the apparent flux of history are primordial realities capable of grounding the other. Each is, rather, a source of access to a perspective from which the other may be dissolved through critique. The drives are implicated in such a dialectic by their “borderline” status between biology and psychological reality, as we can see from the “Theses on Need,” where Adorno writes: “Every drive is socially mediated in such a way that its natural side never appears directly, but only as something socially produced. The appeal to nature in relation to need of any kind is always a mere mask for denial and domination.”⁵⁵ Here, the recognition of a natural moment and a social moment within each drive is combined with that of the impossibility of any pronouncements about the *Trieb an sich*. Whether we might try to locate it in a biological substratum, or in a constitutive conflict within an ambiguously biological-psychological entity, the drive *in itself* can never appear, since it is always socially mediated. While Freud had suggested that the “silent” death-drive is only visible in its admixtures with the sexual drives,⁵⁶ Adorno puts this distinction between essence and appearance – and the profound limitation it implies for our knowledge – at the center of his interpretation of the drive.

Adorno’s recognition of irreducibly social and natural moments in each drive (and each need, which he significantly sees as a more general category) has important ramifications for his

⁵⁴ Theodor W. Adorno, “The Idea of Natural-History,” trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor, in *Things Beyond Resemblance: Collected Essays on Theodor W. Adorno*, ed. Robert Hullot-Kentor (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008 [1932]): 252-304, 252-53.

⁵⁵ Theodor W. Adorno, “Theses on Need,” trans. David Fernbach, *New Left Review* 128 (2021 [1942]): 79-82, 79. While Johnston criticizes Marcuse’s conflation of needs and drives, Adorno is less wary of asserting a fundamental relationship between these two categories: “Need is a social category. Nature, as ‘drive,’ is included in it.” See: Johnston, *Time Driven*, 244.

⁵⁶ Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, 106

view on the interaction of psychoanalysis and social theory. While sociologists and psychologists who consider these fields together do so under an assumption of the fundamental coherence of society and the sciences that study it,⁵⁷ this assumption is unwarranted, as capitalist society is not a unified and logically consistent whole: “An ideal of conceptual unification taken from the natural sciences cannot... be indiscriminately applied to a society whose unity resides in its not being unified.”⁵⁸ Underlying this critique is a conception of society as a non-identical totality. While the shaping of social experience under capitalism works toward ends that can be discerned through dialectical analysis – the production of surplus value and all its subsidiary ends – the society reproduced by the actions of individuals is incapable of conceptual unification. This also means that capitalist society bears unsubsumable particularities within itself. Forms of conceptuality that halt before this nonidentity, attempting to render society self-identical, are *ideological* in the sense that they mask the fundamentally contradictory nature of capitalist society. In this sense, Adorno describes both the separation of metapsychology from sociology, and their facile combination, as socially produced illusions.

However, even if the division between psychology and sociology giving each field validity over a limited domain of human life is “false consciousness” or ideology, it cannot be eliminated through merely methodological injunctions. Ideology here, and in Adorno’s work more generally, is a *socially necessary* delusion; it is necessary, since it accurately expresses the alienation felt by humans in society. From this side, the hope for a metapsychology separated from social and political change has its moment of validity: its alienation of *psyche* from society expresses the

⁵⁷ “Where any thought at all has been devoted to the relation between social theory and psychology, it has not gone beyond merely assigning the two disciplines their place within the total scheme of the sciences; the difficulties their relation involves have been treated as a matter of employing the right conceptual model.” Theodor W. Adorno, “Sociology and Psychology – I,” trans. Irving Wohlfarth, *New Left Review* 46 (1967): 67-80, 68.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 69.

objective conditions of socialization in capitalist society. On the other hand, however, this validity is illusory, since alienation is not an eternal feature of human life, but one that is historically produced. Adorno writes: “People are incapable of recognizing themselves in society and society in themselves because they are alienated from each other and the totality. Their reified social relations necessarily appear to them as an ‘in itself’. What compartmentalized disciplines project on to reality merely reflects back what has taken place in reality.”⁵⁹ While any apparent access to an “in itself” within alienated society is illusory, Adorno also recognizes that the power of this illusion stems from the real relationship between society and the individuals comprising it.

It is important to note that Adorno is not here suggesting the need for a “hybrid” discipline of sociology and psychology, capable of resolving the tensions between these fields into a unified whole. This is clearest in his critique of neo-Freudians such as Karen Horney and Erich Fromm, who attempted to introduce a conception of society into Freudian psychoanalysis. As Adorno puts it, “Freud was right where he was wrong. The authority of his theory lives off his blindness in the face of the separation of sociology and psychology, which... is... the result of those social processes some revisionists call... the self-alienation of the human being.”⁶⁰ Since the truth of society lies in its falsity, or its inability to be seen as a unified whole without contradiction, the limitations adopted by compartmentalized fields are the condition for their ability to say anything about society at all. Adorno thus holds that “a psychology that turns its back on society and idiosyncratically concentrates on the individual and his archaic heritage says more about the hapless state of society than one which seeks by its ‘wholistic approach’ or an inclusion of social ‘factors’ to join the ranks of a no longer existent *universitas literarum*.”⁶¹ Rather than stretching

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ Theodor W. Adorno, “Revisionist Psychoanalysis,” trans. Nan-Nan Lee, in *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 40, no. 3 (2014 [1952]): 309-338, 334.

⁶¹ Adorno, “Sociology and Psychology – I,” 70.

the concepts of these fields to align with one another, Adorno seeks to articulate their irreducible differences. Similar to his conception of natural-history, the aim here is less to reduce *psyche* to society or society to *psyche*, and more to see each one as providing a perspective from which the other can be critiqued.

The issue revealed through a development of metapsychology's contradiction with dialectical social theory is that the former is always, in a sense, "too late" or obsolete, as it can only articulate the psychological side of social structures that have already been formed: "The social power-structure hardly needs the mediating agencies of ego and individuality any longer. An outward sign of this is, precisely, the spread of so-called ego-psychology, whereas in reality the individual psychological dynamic is replaced by the partly conscious and partly regressive adjustment of the individual to society."⁶² In a society that no longer depends on the internalization of its rules by individuals but impresses these rules, as it were, directly as reflexes, psychology holding on to the task of helping the ego to acknowledge the conflicts working within it can become false.⁶³ The implication here is that the dehistoricization of psychic conflict will set up metapsychology as a field unable to accept its own increasing irrelevance. By recognizing a dialectical relationship between *psyche* and society, there remains a chance that the domination of the individual by society can be reflectively comprehended, and thus seen as a product of historical development, rather than an ineradicable truth.

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ Adorno writes: "A brutal, total, standardizing society arrests all differentiation, and to this end it exploits the primitive core of the unconscious. Both conspire to annihilate the mediating ego; the triumphant archaic impulses, the victory of id over ego, harmonize with the triumph of society over the individual." Adorno, "Sociology and Psychology – II," 95. The withering of the ego in the functioning of the social structure is also expressed in: Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964), 10. For a look at the history of this idea in the Frankfurt School theorists, as well as its limitations, see: Jessica Benjamin, "The End of Internalization: Adorno's Social Psychology," *Telos* 32 (1977): 42-64.

We have seen how a metapsychological theory that remains unaffected by social and political change entails a rejection of utopia, viewing the desire for wholly transformed social relations as a denial of reality. When we recognize metapsychology's independence as a socially necessary illusion, however, we can further grasp the apparently coincidental agreement between anti-utopian admonitions and prevalent social and political conditions. It is notable in this regard that Johnston's transcendental metapsychology departs from the scheme of Kant's Transcendental Dialectic, in which the conflict of transcendental ideas is seen as a "natural and unavoidable illusion."⁶⁴ From this Kantian perspective, the idea of nature as a system of law-like regularity has an opposed idea, corresponding to an opposed interest, in the idea of freedom.⁶⁵ While Kant's philosophy is centrally concerned with a self-comprehension of reason's limitations, it never rejects the ideal of a society in which individuals are capable of recognizing the universal moral law. If he proscribes positing this conception of autonomy as an object of experience, Kant also recognizes that reason needs such ideals, since they allow for the cultivation of a reciprocity in freedom.

It is in a similar sense that Adorno defends the utopian moment in philosophy. As he writes in the well-known final aphorism of *Minima Moralia*:

The only philosophy which can be responsibly practiced in face of despair is the attempt to contemplate all things as they would present themselves from the standpoint of redemption... Perspectives must be fashioned that displace and

⁶⁴ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Paul Guyer and Allen Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 1998 [1781/1787]), A 297/B 354.

⁶⁵ Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, A 444-451/B 472-479.

estrangle the world, reveal it to be, with its rifts and crevices, as indigent and distorted as it will appear one day in the messianic light.⁶⁶

The standpoint of redemption yields a view of the “rifts and crevices,” the indigency and distortion of the world as it appears. Far from supporting a naïve belief in the fulfillment of all drives, the retention of utopia utilizes this possibility as a perspective from which established truths can be critiqued. The risk remains, in doing away with utopia, that we also do away with such a form of critique – a form whose possibility must be carefully cultivated in order to prevent the world from becoming an eternal repetition of capital accumulation in which real people are mutilated. The negative-utopian hope animating Adorno’s critical theory thus recognizes that: “Whether there will be further want and oppression—which are the same thing—will be decided solely by the avoidance of catastrophe through the rational establishment of the whole society as humanity.”⁶⁷ While he avoids making positive prescriptions for political change, Adorno recognizes a society meeting human needs would fundamentally alter the conflict of the drives, offering a guiding thread for social and political reflection.⁶⁸ Retaining utopia as a negative, critical concept allows us to recognize the necessity of the hope for a life free of alienation.

5. Leaning-on: Repression and Sublimation

We can get a better idea of the critical utopian perspective in psychoanalysis by exploring two other drive fates not discussed in detail in “Drives and Their Fates,” namely repression and

⁶⁶ Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections on Damaged Life*, trans. E.N.F. Jephcott (London: Verso, 2005 [1951]), 247. Adorno’s conception of messianic redemption is drawn from the works of Walter Benjamin. See, for example: Walter Benjamin, “On the Concept of History,” trans. Harry Zohn, in *Selected Writings: Volume 4: 1938-1940*, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003 [1940]): 389-40, Thesis 17.

⁶⁷ Theodor W. Adorno, “Progress,” trans. Henry W. Pickford, in *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005 [1962]): 143-160, 144.

⁶⁸ “If want disappears, the relation between need and satisfaction changes.” Adorno, “Theses on Need,” 82.

sublimation. From Freud's essay on "Repression," we would like to focus on the hypothesis of a primal repression intrinsic to our psychic apparatus, and from the sketches of his theory of sublimation, we are interested in the way in which sublimation can transform the historical development of drives by detaching them from their initial limitation to an object. In our view, these two dimensions of repression and sublimation are related, and they have a direct impact the interpretation of the late drive theory. Interestingly, when Freud describes primal repression as a fixation of a particular drive-representative that continues to exist unchanged, it is in order to stress the "attraction that the primally repressed material exerts on everything with which it can associate itself."⁶⁹ However, the modality of this primal unconscious attraction cannot be understood without recognizing it as part of a broader antagonism that also opens the psyche to new discoveries and further associations.

Discussing the hypothesis of the "primal repression," Laplanche distinguishes a passive phase of seduction understood as the reception of an enigmatic message from the other and a phase of internal reactivation borne by an "endeavor to bind,"⁷⁰ which leads to the unconscious organization of repressed sexual fantasies. Yet, this primal repression also seems to be at the origin of the split of the drive itself, understood as "*the impact on the individual and on the ego of the constant stimulation exerted from the inside by the repressed thing-presentations* [représentations des choses], *which can be described as the source-objects of the drive.*"⁷¹ There seems to be a pact between primal repression and the phantasmatic representative, through which the quantum of affect carried by the drive is suspended. This view is supported by Freud's own theory of

⁶⁹ Sigmund Freud, "Repression," trans. Graham Frankland, in *The Unconscious*, ed. Adam Phillips (New York: Penguin, 2005 [1915]): 35-45, 37.

⁷⁰ Laplanche, "The Drive and its Source-Object," 132.

⁷¹ *Ibid.* Original emphasis.

unconscious feelings⁷² understood as a “potential onset that has been prevented from developing,”⁷³ and thus removed from proper existence. While phantasmatic representations continue to develop within the unconscious and to attract investments of psychic energy, emotional formations have a frailer fate, hovering ambiguously at the frontier between conscious and unconscious.⁷⁴

We would like to establish a connection between this strange fate of the affective aspect of the drive in general and later reflections on the development of the life of the drives. Indeed, as Freud notes in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, not all the drive-impulses [*Triebregungen*] are granted access to later phases of development. Some are called to change and mature, while others are separated from the former and remain forever immature. A contradiction is created in the psychic apparatus between individualized drives or elements of individualized drives that remain partially “unfulfilled” and others, when the aim and the demands of the former prove to be incompatible with “all those others that are capable of joining together to yield the all-embracing unity of the ego.”⁷⁵ This division cuts through the entire psychic apparatus, setting up the unity of the ego on one side and partial drives that continue to look for gratification on the other, in such a way that no direct mingling is possible between them. The cohesion of the ego is thus obtained at the price of a division between a pacified zone belonging to its unity and a more undetermined zone of struggle where immature drive-elements continue to strive for gratification.

This division inscribed in the history of the drives can be understood topographically as a translation of the economic difference between free-flowing and bound energy that we pointed out

⁷² See: Freud, “The Unconscious,” 59-61.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 60.

⁷⁴ Freud’s explanation for this difference of fate between drive-representatives and drive-affects is that the latter correspond to processes of discharge, while the former are “investments of energy.” See: *Ibid.*

⁷⁵ Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, 135.

when we described the ambiguity of the pleasure principle. It is now time for us to understand the metapsychological consequences of the “leaning-on” process that accounts, generally speaking, for the transformation of the self-conservative tendencies of our drives into sexual ones. When we analyzed this process earlier, in economic terms, we noted that it can only succeed because it can also fail. Shouldn’t then sublimation be considered as a possible trajectory taken by this potential failure, when the process of leaning-on is reversed in such a way that drives are desexualized? In support of such an interpretation we could advance that, while as a general tendency, sublimation diverts the trajectory of the drives from their initial sexual aim,⁷⁶ Freud’s grounding work on narcissism allows for further elaborations of this diversion that highlight the importance of a withdrawal of the sexual drives within the sphere of the ego.⁷⁷ Diversion can thus be understood as a reversion, following the second self-directed fate of the drives. Therefore, in *The Ego and the Id*, the energy of the ego will be described as desexualized *and* sublimated.⁷⁸

However, concluding that the only aim of sublimation is to work in service of the newly established conservative unity of the ego is in tension with its social component, participating in “cultural achievements.”⁷⁹ In regard to its social function, sublimation seems to serve a deeper purpose related to new object-investments, but also to the lost fate of the drives that cannot join the sphere of the ego and thus be recognized as part of it. We would like to suggest that the real drive-material for sublimation is not provided by the ego-drives, but by the partial drives that remain unfulfilled because they are incompatible with the cohesion of the ego, and particularly by their affective charge that hovers at the frontier between the conscious and the unconscious. These

⁷⁶ Freud, *Three Essays*, 178.

⁷⁷ Freud, “On the Introduction of Narcissism,” 386 ff.

⁷⁸ “If this displaceable energy is desexualised libido, it may also be described as sublimated energy; for it would still retain the main purpose of *Eros*—that of uniting and binding—in so far as it helps towards establishing the unity, or tendency to unity, which is particularly characteristic of the ego.” Sigmund Freud, *The Ego and the Id*, trans. Joan Riviere (New York, W.W. Norton, 1960 [1923]), 44.

⁷⁹ Freud, *Three Essays*, 178.

partial drives that are, so to speak, left aside, form a dark zone of struggle for gratification that sublimation can liberate by providing new aims and supporting new transfers of energy. This point can be complicated if we consider the hypothesis that the gap between the partial drives and ego-drives is crystallized through the tension between the ego and the super-ego, which invites us to consider that sublimation also works on our aggressive tendencies, possibly redirecting their fate.

What are the consequences of these topographic moves for the metapsychological understanding of the relationship between *Eros* and *Thanatos* as opposed tendencies of our psychic life? If *Eros* is the demonic free-flowing energy that conscious processes seek to repress, *Thanatos* can only appear as a force of conservation and fixation of this energy that ends up shutting down its free-flow. But if the energy that circulates unbound is destructive, *Eros* can be opposed to its thanatic-demonic flow as a binding force that supports the unity of the ego. At the heart of this chiasm, the possibility of sublimation as a distinct fate of our drives introduces a third option between demonic progress and conservative fixation, between destructive phantasmatic desire and binding unity. This option is the chance that is given to the immature part of ourselves that still needs to grow and attain its realization, in conditions that are often unfavorable to their transformation. But instead of simply tracing a third path as an additional option, sublimation could be understood as the *zone* where a dialectic between progression and conservation becomes possible anew, in such a way that death and life tendencies constantly disrupt and disorient each other in order to find new sources and new objects. In the same way in which repression intervenes between flight and disapproval,⁸⁰ sublimation allows for redirections in the life of our drives that liberate them from regression without forcing them on the path of a demonic progression.

⁸⁰ Freud, "Repression," 35.

Moreover, these redirections also disrupt the cohesion of the ego in such a way that its unity is experienced intermittently and not as a substantial basis of self-conservation.

While this latter thesis deserves a separate analysis, it is clear that the emphasis on regressive tendencies in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* stems from complications of Freud's theory of repression. Here, every progression is made at the expense of a repression and every repression creates opportunities for other forms of pleasure. The repressed drives never give up their search for fulfillment, which is another way to say that the life of our drives continues to develop beyond (or rather beneath) their momentary suspension from our consciousness. In regard to the ongoing struggle for pleasure borne by the primary processes, Freud writes that "the gulf between the level of gratificatory pleasure *demand*ed and the level actually *achieved* produces the driving force that prevents the individual from resting content with any situation he ever contrives."⁸¹ Yet, far from confirming the existence of a universal drive for perfection, this disconnection between the pleasure that is expected and the pleasure that is realized problematizes the role of *Eros* as a force responsible for unity and co-existence.⁸² When Freud quotes from Goethe's *Faust* ("he presses ever onward unbridled, untamed"⁸³), it is clear that *Eros* is nothing else than a demonic free-flowing energy that conscious processes constantly seek to repress, a sort of mysterious inner force stemming from the body for which we have no appropriate defense.

While it is an excess of life that seems to be responsible here for self-destruction, is it hard to understand how this excess can be encapsulated by an outgoing "aggressive tendency" that would define our humanity. Isn't humanity's fate to *resist* aggressivity in order to perpetuate bonds and expand connections that would otherwise be doomed to disappear? In other words, isn't our

⁸¹ Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, 170.

⁸² Freud defines *Eros* as "the force that seeks to push the various parts of living matter into direct association with each other and then keep them together." *Ibid.*, 191, n. 28.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 170.

humanity dependent on a cultivation of social relations – a retranslation of the untranslatable message of the other – rather than being destined to turn against them? Analyzing the trans-individual and historical reproduction of life, Freud describes the sexual drives as conservative in two senses: (1) because “they reincorporate previous states of the relevant living matter to a more marked degree only inasmuch as they show themselves to be particularly resistant to external influences,” and (2) because “they preserve life itself for longer periods.” He continues:

They constitute the true life-drives; and the fact that they act against the intent of the other drives, an intent that by its very nature conduces to death, points to a conflict between them and the rest (...). It amounts to a kind of fluctuating rhythm within the life of organisms: one group of drives goes storming ahead in order to attain the ultimate goal of life at the earliest possible moment, another goes rushing back to a certain point along the way in order to do part of it all over again and thus prolong the journey.⁸⁴

As a goal, life seems to belong to the drives that go “storming ahead,” but as a process, life is also the consequence of resisting their pressure for early extinction. The regressive drives thus contribute to “prolonging the journey,” allowing for a span of life that can transform itself without necessarily being destroyed. It is following from this analysis that Freud questions the schema of a biological evolution driven exclusively by “a universal drive favoring higher development,”⁸⁵ and the very sense of a hierarchy in nature.⁸⁶ We would like to see this intertwinement of regression

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 169.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

⁸⁶ ...for one thing, it is in many cases merely a matter of subjective judgement when we declare one level of development to be “higher” than some other; and for another thing, biology shows us that higher development in one particular respect is very often paid for or balanced out by regression in another. Moreover, there are plenty of animal forms whose early stages clearly reveal that they have developed regressively rather than progressively. Higher development and regression might both be the result of the pressure to adapt exerted by external forces, and the role of the drives might be limited in both cases to the task of assimilating the imposed change as an inner source of pleasure. *Ibid.*, 169-170.

and progression as an opportunity to understand the splitting of the drives as an internal division through which a new chance is given to the repressed to overcome its immature condition. Sublimation as a dialectical zone allows for a reconsideration of what has remained in the dark, not in order to simply disclose new demonic forces, but rather to offer them an unforeseen possibility of maturation and cultivation. This perspective's utopian moment is its recognition that a livable life is possible even when it appears impossible. But this possibility can become real only if the social component of the life of the drives is itself seen as both a resource and a horizon of actualization.

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