

A Hundred Years On: The Death Drive's Mirthless Last Laugh

One day, a scorpion arrives at a riverbank and asks a nearby frog to carry them across the river.

"No" replies the frog. "No way". "If I let you on my back, you may sting me, and the sting of a scorpion is death"

"Now where is the logic in that for me" replies the scorpion.

"If I sting you, you will die, but I will also drown".

Apprehensively the frog agrees to allow the scorpion to travel on its back.

A short while later, out in the middle of the river, the frog begins to feel a terrible paralysing pain and comes to realise the scorpion has stung him.

"Logic!!" cries the dying frog as he begins to descend below the surface,

"There is no logic in this"

"I know" says the scorpion "but I can't help it, it's my character".

To my mind, at play in this Russian fable is our relation to drive theory, specifically the Freudian Death Drive. For a number of years, I've sat and grappled with these meta-psychological constructs, wanting to gain an understanding both theoretically but perhaps more importantly, clinically of how these concepts could operate. My writing has been framed by COVID 19, a geopolitical 'event', both in the Badiouian and Deleuzian sense, a happening of disruptive, yet transformative proportion which continues to challenge our sense of the world, deterritorialising our day to day lives and clinical practices as we had come to know them. COVID-19 arrived on UK shores in late February and subsequently 'trumped' the new decades growing disaster list (wildfires in Australia, Desert Locusts in Kenya, an imminent WWII emerging between Iran and the US, global climate emergency) horror, panic and fear have become our global predicament, with the realisation that we live in the illusion of the permanence of things, of mastery, and of immortality. This paper is an attempt to understanding the last nine months both internally within myself and my clinical work but also more generally within the external context of the current moment. During lockdown I've wanted to deepen my philosophical understanding of the Freud-Lacanian unconscious and the heterogeneous nature of drive and desire. The literature is oceanic, both in volume and in depth, but this paper will attempt to sketch a brief history and overview of Freud's seminal 1920 paper *'Beyond The Pleasure Principle'*, its historical context and ensuing Lacanian reterritorialisation, before arriving to think about its contemporary relevance for the current precarious state of the human condition and the texts enduring impact in its centennial year.

Two years after the culmination of World War I and at the end of the 'Spanish Flu' epidemic, one of the severest viral pandemics in recent history, Freud aged 64, publishes *'Beyond the Pleasure Principle'* (Freud, 1920). Perhaps more than any other of Freud's papers, *'Beyond'* received vehement rebuttal within the psychoanalytic community and continues to divide psychoanalysts and philosophers alike in its speculative propositions. The text shocked the burgeoning analytic community with the introduction of the death drive (*Todestrieb*), Freud's perturbing assertion that all living things are unconsciously driven to their own demise. Freud's acolytes, despite their general obsequiousness, were not so perceptive. With the exception of Sándor Ferenczi, none in Freud's inner circle came to accept the views in his *'Beyond'* paper (Alexander, 1929, Alexander, 1963, Fong, 2016). Despite Freud's epistolary pleas, Oskar Pfister, an early associate of Freud and Swiss Analyst, and Ernest Jones, in defiance of his alliance to Freud and enduring friendship, both reported in 1930 that they simply could not endorse Freud's views on the matter (Gay, 2006). Fritz Wittels, Freud's biographer, suggested that the wild speculations of *'Beyond'* followed the death of Freud's daughter, Sophie Halberstadt, who died in late January 1920 from complications resulting from the Spanish flu (Gay, 2006). Otto Fenichel, an analyst of the so called second generation, stated that the "clinical facts do not necessitate the assumption of a genuine self-destructive instinct" (Fenichel, 1945). Heinz Hartmann, de facto leader of the school of ego psychology sought to develop the structural theory while "omitting Freud's other, mainly biologically oriented set of hypotheses of the 'life' and 'death' instincts." (Hartmann, 1948). Wilhelm Reich, one of the earliest opponents of the death drive, claimed simply that "'Death' was right. 'Instinct' was wrong." (Reich, 1967 p103). Forty years later, in a response to *'Civilization & It's Discontents'* (Freud,

1930), Karen Horney (1960) suggested she felt "obliged to reject the thesis of the death instinct and an innate destructive instinct, as well as the thesis of an "innate evil in man." Erich Fromm (1969) argued that while the death drive "takes into consideration the full weight of destructive tendencies," it "fails to take into account sufficiently of the fact that the amount of destructiveness varies enormously among individuals and social groups". Donald Winnicott (1960) found "the term 'death' instinct unacceptable in describing the root of destructiveness" and across the Atlantic Heinz Kohut (1959) thought that the "concepts of Eros and Thanatos do not belong to a psychological theory". Essentially, the only psychoanalytic theorists who have affirmed the death drive, at least in some part, have generally belonged to one of two psychoanalytic schools; Kleinian or Lacanian. Melanie Klein was an early endorser of the concept of the death drive and used the Freudian '*Todestrieb*' to draw attention to the aggressive impulses she had discovered in her work with children. But as many commentators (Segal, 1979., Dufresne, 2000) have noted, Klein herself never really dealt with the death drive as it was described meta psychologically by Freud (Fong, 2016). Jean Laplanche (1999) argues, "Freud understands his death drive retrospectively as an aggressive drive" because in its initial formulation in '*Beyond the Pleasure Principle*' the death drive was most certainly not conceived as aggression, which Freud (1930) contended a decade later in '*Civilisation & Its Discontents*'.

Nevertheless, in France, under the spell and incantation of Jacques Lacan, the death drive was and has been explored in all its enigmatic quality. Lacan himself utilised the death drive in many different contexts, recognising at every twist and turn the obscurity in understanding Freud's hypothesis. Influenced by Lacan's seminal mid-week seminars and his work more generally, a generation of thinkers reconceptualised Freud's original '*Todestrieb*' into; "unbound" (déliée) libido (Laplanche, 1999) a "counter- evolutionary movement of disorganization" (Marty, 1976), a "desire of non-desire" (Aulagnier, 2001) 'semiotic chora' (Kristeva, 1984) an ever failing attack on primary narcissism (Leclaire, 1998), negative narcissism (Green, 2001). Even more radically, for Derrida (1973) *différance* vis à vis the pleasure principle and later as an archivolithic force (Derrida, 1996), a body without organs for Deleuze (1983) and for Žižek "'undead' eternal life itself" (Žižek, 2006).

For Freud, the text constitutes the first stage of his psychoanalytic account of human ontogeny, notably the stage of biogeny; the coming into being of human life. This new drive theory was meant to provide a comprehensive solution to a set of dilemmas that had previously evaded psychoanalytic explanation, most notably the 'compulsion to repeat' traumatic situations and thereby retroactively attempt to gain some degree of mastery over them. Freud sees this first at the beginning of '*Beyond the Pleasure Principle*' in war neuroses and then begins to look at other examples of this same phenomena, before coming to consider the negative therapeutic reaction. Freud cites observation from his clinical practice of patients who get to the end of an analytical process, who would otherwise be 'cured' or 'better', but then subsequently regress, undermining their own progress and process. This is something he finds inextricable at the time and thus searches for an explanation for these observations in his infamous '*Beyond*' paper. The '*Pleasure Principle*' (*Lustprinzip*) to review, is a paradoxical Freudian concept, previously conceptualised in '*The Interpretation of Dreams*' (Freud, 1900) as the 'unpleasure principle' and then contrasted with the 'reality principle' in '*Two Principles of Mental Functioning*' (Freud, 1911). Freud now surmises in his new '*Beyond*' text:

"The pleasure principle, is the tendency operating in the service of a function whose business it is to free the mental apparatus entirely from excitation or to keep the amount of excitation in it constant or to keep it as low as possible."

(Freud, 1920. p56)

This idea is already an interesting and a paradoxical one, in that pleasure is the elimination of excitation and not the building up of it. Early on in the '*Beyond*' paper Freud introduces the problematic phenomena of repetition, and the compulsion to repeat becomes a focus over forthcoming pages. Repetition challenges Freud's prior theorem as it contrasts with the idea of getting rid of excitation, but the compulsion to repeat actually builds up excitation. Whereas, according to the '*Pleasure Principle*' and Freud's understanding of its psychic manifestations up to this time (Freud, 1900; 1911) we should be trying to get rid of this excitation.

Freud then comes to give the famous example of the Fort / Da game, a game he watches his grandson Ernst play. The game involves his grandson throwing a spindle of cotton over the side of his cot excitedly exclaiming [Fort] 'gone', then reeling the spindle back whilst declaring [Da] 'here'. Essentially, the

opposition between disappearance and return is at work in the fort da game. What's interesting for Freud here is that the child plays the game repeatedly and enjoys the whole game. One of the most interesting parts of what Freud's uncovered is in his suggestion:

"As a rule, one only witnessed its first act, which was repeated, untiringly as a game in itself, through there is no doubt that the greater pleasure was attached to the second act"

(ibid. p9)

What's key about this passage is that Freud is dividing the satisfaction of the game and the loss which occurs in the first act with the pleasure of the second act. There is pleasure in this scenario, but Freud is suggesting that something must be more satisfying about the loss than about the pleasure in the way he describes:

"How then does his [Ernst] repetition of this distressing experience [maternal absence] as a game fit in with the pleasure principle? It may perhaps be said in reply that her [mothers] departure had to be enacted as a necessary preliminary to her joyful return, and that it was in the latter that lay the true purpose of the game. But against this must be counted the observed fact that the first act, that of departure, was staged as a game in itself and far more frequently than the episode in its entirety, with its pleasurable ending"

(ibid. p9).

Freud then moves through a series of hypotheses about how to explain these incidents which violate the pleasure principle and he comes to an idea, of a passive experience in which the mothers' breast was taken away from the child. By actively repeating it in the 'fort da' game, the infant turns the passive experience into an act of mastery. This is actually a way for Freud to reconcile Ernst's game with the pleasure principle, but we see from his musing that he isn't entirely convinced:

"Throwing away the object so that it was 'gone' might satisfy an impulse of the child, which was suppressed in his actual life, to revenge himself on his mother for going away from him. In that case it would have a defiant meaning: right, then, go away! I don't need you. I'm sending you away myself"

"We know of other children who liked to express similar hostile impulses by throwing away objects instead of persons. We are therefore left in doubt as to whether the impulse to work over in the mind some overpowering experience, so as to make oneself master of it, can find expression as a primary event, and independently of the pleasure principle."

(ibid. p9).

Freud then moves to a discussion of repetition compulsion and how this phenomenon is now at odds in this re-working of the '*Pleasure Principle*'

"The manifestations of a compulsion to repeat (which we have described as occurring in the early activities of infantile mental life as well as among the events of psycho-analytic treatment) exhibit to a high degree an instinctual character and, when they act in opposition to the pleasure principle, give the appearance of some 'daemonic' force at work".

(ibid. p29).

This is Freud's first reference to the conceptual character of the death drive. This characterisation in terms of a compulsion to repeat, is an interesting point and will become very important for later thinkers like Lacan and Slavoj Žižek. Freud himself ultimately drops this connection between the death drive and repetition. In the pages which follow, Freud then begins developing his new drive theory suggesting how:

"It seems then that an instinct is an urge inherent in organic life to restore an earlier state of things which the living entity has been obliged to abandon under the pressure of external disturbing forces; that is, it is a kind of organic elasticity, or, to put it another way, the expression of the inertia inherent in organic life"

(ibid. p30).

"Instincts tend towards the restoration of an earlier state of things"

(ibid. p31).

What follows over subsequent pages are a number of famous musings which put Freud at odds with the scientific consensus of his peers and contra to the work of other thinkers of his generation for example Charles Darwin's '*On the Origin of Species*' (Darwin, 1859).

"Everything living dies for internal reasons - becomes inorganic once again - then we shall be compelled to say that the aim of all life is death and, looking backwards, that inanimate things existed before living ones".

(ibid. p32)

"The tension which then arose in what had hitherto been an inanimate substance endeavoured to cancel itself out"

(ibid. p32)

"The organism shall follow its own path to death, and to ward off any possible ways of returning to inorganic existence other than those which are immanent in the organism itself."

(ibid. p33)

"What we are left with is the fact that the organism wishes to die only in its own fashion."

(ibid. p36)

"The opposition between the ego or death instincts and the sexual or life instincts would then cease to hold and the compulsion to repeat would no longer possess the importance we have ascribed to it."

(ibid. p38)

"For if death is a late acquisition of organisms, then there can be no question of there having been death instincts from the very beginning of life on this earth."

(ibid. p41)

If anything has contributed to the ignominy towards Psychoanalysis, it's perhaps this idea that that *"the aim of all life is death"*. The contrast between *'Pleasure Principle'* and death drive becomes for Freud, that the *'Pleasure Principle'* serves the elimination of excitation, whereas the death drive is about sustaining excitation. Essentially, the pleasure principle is about eliminating life's tensions, whereas death drive is giving oneself more trouble. At the very end of the text, Freud makes a pretty remarkable statement

"The pleasure principle actually seems to be in service of the death drive"

(ibid. p57)

At this point, Freud clearly creates a new hierarchy in his thought, going against his earlier hierarchies (Freud, 1900; 1911) which prioritised the action of pleasure, now it's clear in Freud's writings that it is the death drive which takes president with the pleasure principle serving it. Ever since its first publication in the autumn of 1920, it's been repeatedly claimed that Freud's slim 66 page *'Beyond'*, in its original printed format, is one of the most difficult in the Freudian oeuvre, although it is seldom clear where this attributed difficulty actually lies. In a paper given to celebrate the *'Beyonds'* centenary, Dany Nobus (2020) questions why the Dasein of *'Beyond the Pleasure Principle'* is so heavy and why it's so unbearable troubling that many readers want to do away with it altogether? Addressing various lines of critique, Nobus asks whether the texts difficulty might primarily be due to resistance on behalf of the reader themselves? Offering a critique of those analyst's and philosophers who accept the death drive, Nobus laments their desire to explicate, to reinterpret Freud's *'Todestrieb'*, rendering Freud's original modus operandi unintelligible by overlaying it with another text or interpretative framework, allegedly better suited than Freud's own Biological or pseudo biological paradigm. One such thinker is Jacques Lacan.

The death drive is fleetingly present in Lacan's early seminars, however its only really in *Seminar VII – The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* that Lacan begins his reconceptualisation. Lacan sees the death drive as a movement beyond the symbolic order and a way in which the subject has of reaching out in a way that is beyond everything that is given in their symbolic world (Lacan, 2006). Lacan sees the death drive as crucial to a desire we have to restart everything from zero. In *Seminar XI – The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, Lacan develops his concept of death drive further suggesting:

"Every drive is virtually a death drive"

(Lacan 2006, p719).

Drive becomes monistic for Lacan and drawing on Freud's notion of repetition, follows a circular movement (Lacan, 2006). For Lacan, all drive follows the pattern of death drive and in his re-reading of Freudian theory drawing on Saussurean linguistics, Roman Jakobson's thesis, Claude Lévi-Strauss's analysis of myths and Heideggerian philosophy, 'the unconscious', 'repetition', 'jouissance', 'drive', 'desire' and 'the Other', become central tenants of the Lacanian unconscious and Lacanian Psychoanalysis more generally. Lacan's so called 'Return to Freud' was his own term for this structuralist sublation, whereby he sought to extricate Viennese theory from its original biological model. In his 1957 seminar 'The Formations of The Unconscious' Lacan claimed to re-think the functions of the psychic apparatus on the basis of an initial, or primary model that possessed the structure of language. During his seminars held between 1953 – 1956, Lacan made the unconscious a language, showing that as 'subjects' of this linguistic unconscious men and woman are inhabited by a speech, which constantly prompts them to a disclosure at the edge of being. Lacan proposed a theory of the 'subject' determined by the primacy of the symbolic function, calling this function of speech constitutive of the acts and destiny of the 'subject'; the 'signifier' (Roudinesco, 2014). Lacan saw the object of satisfaction, our object of desire, 'object a' as marking a negativity (loss or gap) as such, around which the drive circulates. Drive for Lacan, operating with its own autonomous logic, further combines with different things, ideas, and objects, in satisfaction beyond need, or pleasure beyond pleasure, in what Lacan refers to as 'jouissance'. In *Seminar VII* Lacan describes this 'jouissance' as:

"not purely and simply the satisfaction of a need but as the satisfaction of a drive"

(Lacan, 1960 p.209 cited Miller, 1994 p.209).

In *Seminar XIX 'Ou pire'*, 'jouissance' is further elaborated on in terms of life and death

"The dialog of life and death...becomes dramatic only from that moment when enjoyment intervenes in the equilibrium of life and death. The vital point, the point where...a speaking being emerges is this disturbed [dérangé] relationship to one's own body which is called jouissance."

(Lacan 2011, p.43 cited Zupančič, 2017, p.89)

Crucially for Lacan, drive satisfies itself by missing its object. This was a revolutionary idea and a foundational concept more generally for Lacanian Psychoanalysis – 'a satisfaction obtained by not obtaining'. Lacan stresses that desire is always unfulfilled, it is always a desire for something else (Lacan, 2006.) We do not desire what we already have, we always desire something we do not have. Desire is therefore constituted in its opposition to a lack. This object of desire connotes its own absence, or lack. Thus, we arrive at a most profound insight; *that whatever we desire must also threaten us by its absence*. This idea is not entirely different to the Kleinian concept of 'unconscious envy' and for Lacanians, prefigures the later conflicts of the 'symbolic' realm. Bringing these aforementioned concepts together, Lacan suggests:

"Misadventure of desire [is] at the hedges of jouissance, watched out for by an evil god. This drama is not as accidental as it is believed to be. It is essential: for desire comes from the Other, and jouissance is located on the side of the Thing."

(Lacan, 2006, p. 724)

Jacques Allen Miller (1994) elaborates here, that Lacan (2006) is emphasising the disjunction between the 'signifying order' – its locus which is the Other – and 'jouissance' which is taken up here via Freud's concept of das Ding 'the Thing' (Miller, 1994. p.423 cited Feldstein, Fink & Jaanus, 1996). To bring this back to the remit of the current paper, crucially, for Lacan, desire is inscribed within the limits of the pleasure principle, in other words, desire remains captive of the pleasure principle:

"Desire remains captive and what lies beyond it, is the value of jouissance (la valeur de la jouissance)"

(Jacques Allen Miller, 1994. p.423 cited Feldstein et al, 1996)

Lacan rejected Freud's dualistic drive theory; firstly, the duality of the ego drives and the sexual drives and secondly, the duality between the sexual drives and the death drives. For Lacan, a monistic perspective was favoured over the dualistic Freudian perspective. This leads Lacan to suggest that every drive irrespective of its ostensibly primordial features, contains a death component included in it. This appears as an extension of Freud's own work, essentially Lacan picks up where Freud left off in

the *'Beyond'* text, without bringing in the second typography of the id, ego and super ego. For Lacan and many other Lacanian thinkers, the death drive is a death drive on account of the symbolic structure in which human beings are embedded. Lacan rereads Freud's biological framework through a structural, linguistic framework of the Saussurean symbolic, of the signifier and the signified.

Offering critique of Lacan's re-reading of Freud, Nobus (2020) sees Lacan's reworking of Freud's death drive as only relevant in terms of the second phase of Freud's ontogenetic theory, the stage of anthropogeny: the stage of becoming human. Subsequently, Nobus (2020) argues that Lacan's recuperation of the death drive is simultaneously an annihilation of the Freudian concept of *'Todestribe'* and more generally that Lacan's observations about the link between death and the symbolic are only a reimagining of the later stages of Freud's work, for example in *'Moses and Monotheism'* where Freud reconsiders what it means to become human (Freud, 1939). For Nobus, and I agree myself, this isn't what Freud's interested in, in his *'Beyond'* text. In *'Beyond the Pleasure Principle'*, I think Freud is primarily interested in what it means to become alive and what it means to be alive, ultimately this is why it's a biogenetic, as opposed to anthropogenic paper. This is perhaps why Freud spends many pages in *'Beyond'* referring to the biological work of his peers (Weissman, Hartmann, Woodruff, Maupass, Calkins, Loeb & Hering) because he is dealing with questions exclusively directed at the still mysterious transition between inorganic matter to organic life. Lacan's symbolic focus on the question of the emergence of humanity, the emergence of the subject and subjectivity are somewhat different to Freud's focus of Phylogeny and the emergence of life in his *'Beyond'* paper.

Like the work of many post Lacanian scholars, Slavoj Žižek spends a great deal of time contrasting desire and drive, contrasting the satisfaction of drive with the dissatisfaction of desire.

"The drive's goal – to reach its object – is 'false,' it masks its 'true' aim, which is to reduce its own circular movement by way of repeatedly missing its object"

(Žižek, 2012)

Žižek's thinking here is very much in line with Lacan's *Seminar XI*, in that that drive satisfies itself through missing its object, rather than through obtaining it. It's important to remember here that Lacan's use of *'object'*, isn't a singular whole entity, but the object cause of desire. Lacan's *'object a'* is a partial object, there is no corresponding whole object, because, insofar as it is lacking, *'object a'* creates an obstacle to any kind of totality. I like this Lacanian idea generally, and I think the specificity of Žižek's use of true and false here is also useful. I also think both have application clinically and speaks to when we see not only our analysands, but ourselves included, repeating similar patterns in our lives, despite the suffering evoked in this repetition. Or to use a Lacanian idiom, the suffering which the *'symptom'* evokes. Clinically I have in mind here; relationship infidelity, various addictions, substance misuse, alongside patterns of disordered eating behaviour like we see in Obesity, Anorexia and Bulimia Nervosa.

Moving away from purely Freud-Lacanian theory, Alenka Zupančič, a Slovenian philosopher whose work focuses on Lacanian psychoanalysis and continental philosophy, offers an impressive ontological reconceptualisation of the death drive in her 2017 text *'What IS Sex?'*

Drawing on Deleuze's *'Difference and Repetition'*, Hegelian Dialectics, Lacan's work on the nature of drive and desire and Freud's *'Beyond'* paper itself, Zupančič (2017; 2017b) suggests that as paradoxical as it might sound, it is the death drive which eventually shifts and reorientates life's fundamental goal of returning to the inanimate into something more creative, constituting a different path through life to death. Zupančič reimagines that it is the death drive which opens up a space, a stage for achievements which stretch beyond the ordinary, an ontological opening, a Deleuzian *'crack'* for living pure difference. Using Freud's (1920, p39) description of the instincts of self-preservation as *"component instincts whose function is to assure that the organism shall follow its own path to death, and to ward off any possible ways of returning to inorganic existence other than those which are immanent in the organism itself"*, Zupančič sees the death drive

"As establishing (and driving) the ways of returning to inorganic existence other than those which are immanent in the organism itself. The organism dies, but it is more than an ideological or religious phrase to say that there are things (creations) that outlive it.

And it is precisely at this point that one has to situate the concept of the death drive and insist on abandoning the idea of the duality of drives: there is only the death drive".

(Zupančič, 2017, p106).

For Zupančič the death drive isn't thought through the register of destructive aggressive tendencies or a return to the inanimate, but as that which constitutes or brings forth an alternative path. Borrowing Beckett's maxim "*Try again. Fail again. Fail better*" Zupančič in '*What IS Sex?*' coins a new motto for the death drive in her own reformulation of Beckett's maxim "*Die again, die better!*" For Zupančič (2017) the death drive offers an alternative way "*to break out from the fatigue of life: not the capacity to live forever, but the capacity to die differently*". I like Zupančič's reimagining of the death drive into something creative or reparative, as opposed to a purely destructive force. Perhaps by employing Zupančič here, and with a nod to Deleuze's philosophy of '*Difference and Repetition*' more generally; Psychoanalysis could be conceptualised as a creative process, a matter of experimentation, of thinking 'difference', 'becoming' and ultimately re-imagining, how one might live differently or die better!

"We could say: the death drive is what makes it possible for us to die differently. And perhaps in the end this is what matters, and what breaks out from the fatigue of life: not the capacity to live forever, but the capacity to die differently".

(Zupančič, 2017, p106).

"To think of the death drive as fundamental does not amount to positing the primacy of some obscure will or tendency to aggression, destruction, death. As Deleuze perspicuously pointed out, Freud did not discover the death drive in the context of destructive and aggressive tendencies, but in the context of considering the phenomena of repetition. According to Deleuze (1968), repetition itself is precisely the place of original affirmation. Which is why for him the true question is: 'How is it that the theme of death, which appears to draw together the most negative elements of psychological life, can be in itself the most positive element, transcendently positive, to the point of affirming repetition?'

(Zupančič, 2017b, p166).

With that said from Žižek and Zupančič, it could be suggested that these, alongside the many other conceptual reimagining's of Freud's original '*Todestrieb*' (Dufresne, 2000; Akhtar & O'Neil, 2011) only allow the existence of the death drive via clever procreations, which also surreptitiously annihilate Freud's original conception. Žižek's (2006) take on the death drive is by far one best example of this recuperative annihilation of Freud's original '*Beyond*' text:

"The Freudian death drive has nothing whatsoever to do with the craving for self-annihilation, for the return to the inorganic absence of any life-tension; it is, on the contrary, the very opposite of dying – a name for the 'undead' eternal life itself, for the horrible fate of being caught in the endless repetitive cycle of wandering around in guilt and pain. The paradox of the Freudian 'death drive' is therefore that it is Freud's name for its very opposite, for the way immortality appears within psychoanalysis, for an uncanny excess of life, for an 'undead' urge which persists beyond the (biological) cycle of life and death, of generation and corruption. The ultimate lesson of psychoanalysis is that human life is never 'just life': humans are not simply alive, they are possessed by the strange drive to enjoy life in excess, passionately attached to a surplus which sticks out and derails the ordinary run of things"

(Žižek, 2006 p.62).

As appealing as these reworkings are, Nobus (2020) offers no reservation in saying that each and every aspect of Žižek's statement is ultimately blatantly incorrect, and his (Žižek's) criticism only stands to be correct in line with Žižek's own reading of the Freudian text. Because for Freud himself:

"An instinct is an urge inherent in organic life to restore an earlier state of things"

"All instincts tend towards the restoration of an earlier state of things"

"If we are to take it as a truth that knows no exception that everything living dies for internal reasons becomes inorganic once again then we shall be compelled to say that the aim of all life is death and, looking backwards, that 'inanimate things existed before living ones'".

(Freud, 1920 p 32).

It could be suggested that Žižek's own conception of the death drive, isn't actually a reading which does justice to the literality and content of Freud's original text as such. Freud never retracts his belief that all living matter, is fundamentally animated by the tendency towards the cancellation of its own existence. This for Freud is pervaded by an involuntary, autonomic, parasympathetic, intentionality to return to an inorganic state. In short, under the guise of rescuing the Freudian death drive from the clutches of those who feel it should be indiscriminately discarded as a speculation too far, Žižek (who is by no means alone in embracing this strategy) only accepts Freud's '*Todestrieb*' on the condition that it can be; killed

off, turned into its opposite, rendering it extinct in its original form. Perhaps those who resist following the path where Freud is leading them, those who prefer not to remember the traumas of life, results from certain resistance on behalf of the (their) unconscious ego which remains exceedingly keen to preserve the workings of the '*pleasure principle*'!

Any Psychoanalytic textbook will probably tell us that the most fundamental way to interpret Freud's title '*Beyond the Pleasure Principle*' is to interpret it as the death drive. What is situated beyond the pleasure principle is the death drive. Freud says literally:

"The pleasure principle seems actually to serve the death drive"

(Freud, 1920, p63).

However, for me, it's not the death drive that is beyond the pleasure principle. Put more provocatively, it could be suggested that the forces which drive life towards extinction are associated with a certain degree of pleasure or '*jouissance*' in themselves. This may be a conclusion which we as humans do not want to accept, how could one possibly think that the force that drives us to our own extinction could actually endow, provide and generate for us, a source of pleasure. But if Freud's '*Pleasure Principle*' serves the purpose of reducing tension to its lowest possible level, thus potentially to nothingness, and the death drive annihilates the intrinsic tensions of life; both must be operating in accordance to the same rules. So for me, what lies beyond the pleasure principle is not the death drive, what lies beyond the pleasure principle, is more likely to be located in the life drives, the sex drives and their narcissistic avatars. It is perhaps these libidinal forces which serve the preservation and prolongation of life, and by its implications, stand in the surface in the continuation of conflict. Perhaps contrary to its appearance it's not the death drive which is giving Freud a headache, it's the life and sexual drives and their narcissistic manifestations within the ego which are unsettling. It's not the death drive that should be conceded as the source of our miseries, but sex and narcissism. Maybe this is the true traumatic message of '*Beyond the Pleasure Principle*'. Rather than being disconcerted by the '*death drive*' as a fundamental source of protracted unpleasure, it is life itself, human sexuality and particularly narcissistic investment in satisfaction of the ego that should actually fundamentally trouble us.

Critically it's not narcissism which operates beyond the '*Pleasure Principle*' per se. However, I'd like to put forward that narcissism, perhaps primary narcissism more specifically, does in fact resonate with the original conception of Freud's '*Todestrieb*' in his '*Beyond*' paper. Employing Freud's conception of narcissism from his 1914 paper aptly titled '*On Narcissism*' - as the desire and energy that drives one's instinct to survive and representing the point where the ego drives and the sexual drives fuse, this can be seen as an index point for the contact and conflict between the various forces which maintain and promote survival. Crucially, and this is the crux of my synthesis between narcissism and the death drive; the stronger the narcissistic tendencies at work in the human life form, the more likely the human life form's own death is to become a reality. For the narcissistically endowed, the libidinal cathexis of the ego becomes so excessive that the anticipated prolonging of life shifts into its opposite and resides in its sudden or gradual demise. This maybe by far the greatest paradox of them all: the more human beings are narcissistically invested, in the maintenance and extension of their own individual lives, the more they are at risk of unwittingly expediting their own death.

In Central Europe during the autumn of 1920, when Freud's '*Beyond the Pleasure Principle*' first appeared, the radical disintegration of the old imperial powerhouses which one ruled, had thrown Western Europe into disarray, leaving people desperately looking for new psycho-social moorings. With the pandemic of the Spanish flu having raged many parts of Europe and in the aftermath of the First World War, people were wondering about whether this would signal the end of the world as they had known it. Uncanny in terms of the current moment, Newspapers were full at the time with words such as 'unprecedented'. Never had the world, a Vienna newspaper claimed, "seen the political uncertainty, the rampant unemployment, super inflation, the outdoor threats of violent crime and the indoor struggles of daily life, the ubiquitous aura of death and disaster like we have seen it now". (Nobus, 2020). The socio-cultural climate in which Freud wrote his '*Beyond*' paper was rife with destruction. Yet destructiveness was also pursued as the necessary precondition for radical change. To claim as Freud did that the elementary living entity and by extension all life forms would have no wish to change and

secondly, that there was no such thing as a force tending towards progress, it shouldn't come as a surprise, that Freud's painfully pessimistic message fell on deaf ears.

So, what parallels do Freud's hundred-year-old words have to the current moment? What can we do with Freud's famous musings? What can we say about this, which could be relevant to our current epoch of inertia? A century on, in the pervasive atmosphere of intense neoliberal renewal, might the current constellation of the human life form, which is commonly regarded as the worst peacetime emergency in living memory, which some journalists have called the worst global, humanitarian and economic catastrophe, be significantly better suited to appreciate the sinister relevance of Freud's '*Todestrieb*', and the historical circumstances under which these speculations originally took shape? I'm sorry, but I very much doubt it. Sadly our age is individualistic, algorithmic and fake news prevails. Homo-economicus loves; identity, hashtags, superficiality, and the philosophy of '*YOLO*' and '*FOMO*'. We are plagued with the hangover of post enlightenment thinking; estimation, economic determinism, populism, opinion polls, immediacy and relativism. We are alienated in a Marxian and Frommian fashion, our emotions and feelings are recreationally numbed and happily endorsed by big pharma, understood against a background of neurogenetic mono causality. With the rise of political populism in the West, racism, sexism, xenophobia and nationalism are increasingly endorsed by many leaders to oil the machine. Late capitalism endorses despair, misery and planetary extinction. Over on the far right the reactivation of religious fanaticism and ideological fascism serve as a political reference point and sense of identity for some. Throughout the democratic world, self-regulating practices are expanding immeasurably to the exclusion of science, reason and philosophical thinking. In this world the quest for quasi spiritual enlightenment and atomised pleasure, not collective happiness, has replaced the aspiration to truth.

Narcissism, entitlement and exceptionalism ruled 2020 like never before. Autocrats in various parts of the world have cleverly taken advantage of the pandemic, boosting their own image, galvanising, increasing and prolonging their positions of power. Quote on quote average citizens too, even in those countries with the highest Covid related deaths routinely reject anything that might be seen as an encroachment upon their perceived, spurious sense of civil liberties. Perhaps increasingly so in the midst of an increasing 'R value' and predictions of secondary spikes over the forthcoming months. One sees that we have been lured into a false sense of freedom by the neoliberal values of self-governance and limitless enterprise into which many of us in the western world are sadly embedded day in, day out. I've heard multiple individuals over the last 9 months offer "I pay my taxes, so I want to do whatever I want and not to be told by someone what to do like wearing this stupid mask" "We came to Cornwall on holiday to get away from these stupid rules, I'll park my car where I fucking like." "I want to be in full control of my life" I heard someone else claim "So I will go out whenever I want, see who I want to see and do all the things which I want to do without any kind of restriction because that's the kind of life I want to lead". There is always the possibility that narcissism whether under the guise of self-control or political nationalism, increases as an individual or collective response, are faced with sudden instances of death and destruction. Byung-Chul Han (2020) offers a damning depiction of the last 6 months:

"The virus will not defeat capitalism. The viral revolution will not happen: no virus is capable of making revolution. The virus isolates and individualizes us. It does not generate any strong collective feelings. Somehow, everyone cares only about their own survival. Solidarity in keeping mutual distances is not a solidarity that allows us to dream of a different, more peaceful, more just society"

Byung-Chul Han (2020)

Surely the take home message from Freud's '*Beyond*', is how to use the conception of '*Todestrieb*' in a radical way to challenge the narcissism of the neoliberal subject of psychology, who situates and functions through success and self-interest. Culturally we need to radically create awareness that self-governance and limitless enterprise leads ultimately to self-destruction. Clinically, sometimes all it takes is for the narcissistically endowed to feel vulnerable in terms of their own actions, for change to begin. What is startling and generally very hard to sit with, is that perhaps for the first time in history we have become the architects of our own destruction (Attenborough, 2020 cited Lathane, 2020). The goal of analysis is not to abolish the '*death drive*' (that's ultimately a purely narcissistic goal). To use a neologism from the current moment, a circuit break is perhaps needed, however, not in the conservative sense of the term! In our clinics we need to open up a space for our analysands to question their own narcissistic involvement in orchestrating their own self destruction. In 2020, the '*work hard, play hard*' machine ground to a halt. It seems that as a society we did do some long overdue thinking. Sadly, but

not unexpectedly over the last six months, more and more patients are presenting with feelings of alienation, complete loss and fear pertaining to social and economic uncertainty. A reworking of our neoliberal attitudes urgently needs to take place. Never has the country been more politically and economically divided. The gap between rich and poor increased exponentially during lockdown, home-made sour dough and Banana bread vs a 10-hour minimum wage, supermarket shift, followed by a packed commute on packed public transport. Furthermore, never have the forces of love and hate been so widespread and normalised during lockdown. Mask-wearing and lockdown rules are now causing deeper social fractures than Brexit, a recent Guardian article claims (Booth, 2020). The fleeting solidarity of the early weeks of the pandemic has given way to hate, division and distrust. Research by the thinktank Demos suggests only a third of non-leave voters think people who voted for Brexit are bad people, compared with more than two-thirds of people who abided by lockdown rules, saying they hated or resented lockdown rule-breakers or thought they were bad people (Booth, 2020).

We must rapidly attain more of a balance between the forces of life and life, between sex and destruction, between Eros and Thanatos. We need a different way to navigate between the various conflictual recesses in our mental spaces, in such a way that not only our patients, but as a wider society we don't feel so completely alienated and lost, resorting to harming ourselves or the others around us. In Freud's *'Beyond the Pleasure Principle'* life isn't merely balanced against death. Freud radically proposes that life is fundamentally driven by death. Perhaps instead of rubbishing Freud's claims, we should re read this classic text, a hundred years on, in the context of the current moment. A time when the potential extinction of human life form and the end of the world as we know it, is at stake more than ever before, owing to our own deadly pandemics of narcissism and SARS-CoV-2.

T.G.
Summer 2020

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