

## Freud's Concept of the Death Drive and its Relation to the Superego

*Joanne Faulkner*

### Abstract

This paper addresses the emergence of the 'death drive' in Sigmund Freud's later work, and the significance of this development for his psychoanalytic theory as a whole. In particular, the paper argues that the 'death drive' is a pivotal concept, articulating a connection between what are commonly understood as the 'lower' and 'higher' functions of the psyche. Moreover, the death drive is pivotal in a second sense, in that it articulates a turn away from the strictly empirical realm of science, to a dark and obscure field indicated (in terms of lack), but not comprehended, by observable phenomena. Finally, the paper suggests that as Freud's departure from his scientific methodology into the wilderness of speculation, the death drive represents his most valuable contribution to psychoanalysis. With the death drive, Freud is able to engender a new perspective of human being: one that is not already encompassed by the mechanistic neurological viewpoint from which his researches first issued.

---

Late in his career, Sigmund Freud demonstrated what might be described as a crisis of faith with regard to the central tenets of his psychoanalytic account of the human psyche. In his paper "Beyond the Pleasure Principle," he momentarily shifts from a mode of discourse that embraces a scientific regard for the priority of evidence and experimentation, to a highly speculative discourse that, in a particular light, appears directly to challenge his scientific perspective. Freud attempts in this work to elucidate an aspect of human being that refuses to yield to the scientific gaze, he hypothesises, because it is residual of an inorganic heredity, existing within the organism, but ontologically *prior* to the interchange of stimulus and reaction charted by neurology. That most subterranean pocket of the psyche — the unconscious — harbours within it an even further inaccessible vestige of the organism's inorganic origin, the 'death drive.'

According to Freud, this precipitate of the organism's prehistory circumvents the pleasure principle, which ensures a level of homeostasis in the body only once it has organised itself as a functional whole. In opposition to the pleasure principle, the 'death drive' — residual of a pre-organic, chaotic past — attempts to undo the organic whole. Indeed, it finds its specific pleasure precisely in what is most painful and disturbing to the organism.

Yet, while Freud designates the death drive as the body's primitive — most *inhuman* element — there are also intriguing connections between this most archaic and automatic impulse and that which we understand to be most cultured, creative, and human: conscience, art, religion, or what Freud nominated as the sublimated drive, and the superego. What he calls the highest human achievements—and presumably considers furthest from 'brute instinct'—are also, in part, products of a primeval genetic legacy, according to Freud. In this manner, the 'lowest,' the most acephalous drive, intersects with the 'highest,' most creative and intelligent, in the region beyond the pleasure principle. This 'beyond' of the pleasure principle interests me because, somewhat appropriately, it takes Freud beyond his comfort zone as a scientific thinker, and as a respected 'man of letters.' For, while the concept of the death drives is useful to Freud (for reasons that I will elaborate below), these remarks are also usually only brief, tangential, and speculative, and are frequently accompanied by qualifications that suggest

a certain embarrassment (regarding their lack scientific objectivity) on Freud's part. Accordingly, if Freud derived both pleasure and discomfort from his idea of the death drive, then perhaps this idea itself is an experience 'beyond' the pleasure principle. If this is the case then, I would contend, it also constitutes his most valuable (i.e., sublime) contribution to psychoanalysis.

## I

Freud's 'death drive' remains one of the most enigmatic and metaphysically obscure of his concepts. While it became central to Melanie Klein and Jacques Lacan's developments of psychoanalysis, many dedicated Freudians balk at the revelatory tone adopted by Freud in "Beyond the Pleasure Principle," where the death drive is introduced, and consider the concept to be eccentric at best.<sup>1</sup> In 1919 we find in Freud's work what appears to be a decided break from the tenor of his previous theoretical commitments. This was the year in which he wrote on 'war neuroses,' and completed "The 'Uncanny'," as well as the first draft of "Beyond the Pleasure Principle." In these works we find Freud increasingly dissatisfied with the all-encompassing scope that he had previously awarded the pleasure principle. The general hypothesis that the nervous system seeks to *discharge* itself of excitation — or unpleasure — failed to explain, in a satisfactory manner, many of his clinical observations. Rather, some conditions appear to

*dwell* in unpleasure, and Freud noted a ‘compulsion to repeat’ in many of his patients that signalled to him the emergence of a different type of drive, ordered by imperatives other than the pleasure principle. Take, for instance, the war veteran, who returns every night in his dreams to the carnage of war, a situation that defies Freud’s understanding — in accordance with the pleasure principle — of the dream as wish-fulfilment. Or, consider the neurotic who plays out again in her relations with the analyst all those hopes and attendant feelings of rejection that she first experienced in relation to her father, as if she could not get enough disappointment. In each of these situations, the drive appears to circulate about a point of pure pain that is neither ejected from, nor neutralised by, the psychic system as the pleasure principle demands, and in fact attracts rather than repels the subject. This ‘unpleasure’ refuses to be worked through, and the analysand is caught in its automatic movement, unable to discharge a tension that continues to build with each repetition of the dream, the symptom, or the transference.

Initially, the ‘death drive’ appears in Freud’s thought as a conceptual ‘gap’: that is, as Freud’s own bewilderment in the face of the persistent presence of pain and resistance to treatment that he found in his clinic. Freud posits the death drive as a makeshift, yet alluring, appendix to his understanding of the psychic economy. The death drive is opposed to the *life drive* — libido, or Eros — which builds life into greater and greater bodies, and so increases the opportunity for each smaller body (or cell) to survive.

Conversely, the death drive tends toward bodily disintegration, and in due course will return the organism back to an *ultimate* equilibrium — beyond that sought by the pleasure principle — in death. Thus, while ‘libido’ attaches to objects, creating ties of affection, or ‘energy cathexes,’ the death drive destroys, and initiates relations of conflict. It causes a build-up of tension that will lead to great psychic distress if it is not harnessed and redirected by the ego (from which libido issues).

Yet, if the concept of the death drive first came into existence in order to fill a conceptual gap, it does so only as what Lacan calls an *Unbegriff*, a gap concept, or concept of lack (Lacan 1981, 26). The death drive is the most unconscious, or concealed, element of the unconscious: it resides beyond the ‘pleasure principle,’ which had attracted Freud precisely because it adheres to observable phenomena (i.e., to a ‘physics’ of the human mind). The death drive, on the other hand, is obscure because it is more primordial than libido: in fact Eros *emerges* from Thanatos, as its outward manifestation. Freud thus resorts to a mode of metaphysical speculation to illuminate the death drive. At its loftiest, *Thanatos* expresses the body’s place in the greater scheme of things, as what is mortal, and must return to nothingness. Freud’s contention, considered peculiar by his contemporaries — and indeed, many Freudians even today — was that an element internal to the organism itself takes death as its end, and life is only a means to that end.

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 1991a, 246. Emphasis in original)

The cosmic breadth of this aspect of the death drive, insofar as it wants to return to a previous state, appealed to Freud, who enjoyed developing (sometimes tenuous) analogies between the human psyche and the natural world. Indeed, in “Beyond the Pleasure Principle,” he locates the death drive in the migratory patterns of birds and fish that return to their primordial breeding grounds each year, and conjectures that the succession of stages of the human embryo’s development reminisces the path taken by evolution. According to Freud, these phenomena demonstrate an imperative internal to the organism to return to a previous state. Perhaps we can also recognise Nietzsche’s thought of eternal return here, which had captured Freud’s imagination around the time that he was developing the death drive hypothesis.<sup>2</sup> In this connection, the death drive satisfied Freud’s conviction that the mind is intrinsically connected to the material world, as well as a more poetic sensibility that concerned him at that time.

Yet the idea that we harbour within us the seed of our own destruction was also conceptually liberating for Freud, because it addressed questions that he could not otherwise approach with the apparatus of the pleasure and reality principles: questions regarding the origins of masochism and sadism; the apparent pleasure that the neurotic

derives from her obviously painful symptoms; the failure of the analytic interpretation to ‘cure’ the analysand; as well as the more global (and supposedly less pathological) phenomenon of war that had just gripped the lives and imaginations of otherwise civilized populations. Prior to the development of the death drive theory, Freud could only account for such phenomena in a partial and indirect manner. For instance, in his earlier work, *Instincts and Their Vicissitudes*, Freud had already attempted to explain masochism and sadism according to his former conceptual schema, organised by the pleasure principle. In that work, he described masochism as a *reversal* of sadism (its ‘passive’ inversion): “The active aim (to torture [...]) is replaced by the passive aim (to be tortured [...])” (Freud 1984, 124). However, pleasure is not actually located in this ‘being tortured’ for Freud. Rather, the masochist must *identify* with his torturer, such that he derives his pleasure through this identification, as a distant perpetrator of cruelty rather than its recipient. Masochism was too problematic to be accounted for within the narrow terms of the pleasure and reality principles. It did not appear to satisfy the condition that pain (or unpleasure, or tension) might be endured only to the extent that the energy thus stored may be used to achieve a greater pleasure. In other words, there is nothing outside itself that masochism achieves. Thus, although Freud could not dismiss the occurrence of masochism (in fact, he defined ‘femininity’ as a species of masochism),<sup>3</sup> the notion of a specific pleasure that consists in the sensation of injury — of disintegration and pain — was paradoxical to him.

Yet, once the death drive is brought into the arrangement, masochism is no longer an unaccountable phenomenon, but is, rather, a first principle of human experience that not only undermines, but in fact underpins, the pleasure principle. Thus, after “Beyond the Pleasure Principle,” masochism is not *derived from* sadism, but is instead a regression to an earlier stage, the danger of which sadism had served to forestall. In “The Economic Problem of Masochism,” Freud discusses the possibility of ‘primary masochism.’ The hierarchy of sadism and masochism thus comes to be reversed, such that the former is now an externalisation of the latter:

In (multicellular) organisms the libido meets the instinct of death, or destruction, which is dominant in them and which seeks to disintegrate the cellular organism and to conduct each separate unicellular organism [composing it] into a state of inorganic stability (relative though this may be). The libido has the task of making the destroying instinct innocuous, and it fulfils the task by diverting that instinct to a great extent outwards — soon with the help of a special organic system, the muscular apparatus — towards objects in the external world. The instinct is then called the destructive instinct, the instinct for mastery, or the will to power. A portion of the instinct is placed directly in the service of the sexual function, where it has an important part to play. This is sadism proper. (Freud 1961, 163. Strachey’s square parentheses)

And in “Beyond the Pleasure Principle” he writes:



Is it not plausible to suppose that this sadism is in fact a death instinct which, under the influence of the narcissistic libido, has been forced away from the ego and has consequently only emerged in relation to the object? It now enters the service of the sexual function. (Freud 1991a, 259)

In this manner, sadism becomes a kind of domestication of the death drives by the libido, in order to avert self-destruction by the organism. Or, perhaps more precisely, sadism represents a *cooption* of the destructive urge, to the libido, so that rather than taking itself as its object in an act of self-annihilation, it becomes a means of adjoining other objects to the ego, and is made to serve the pleasure principle once more by discharging accumulated tension.

Such a complicated arrangement suggests that this ‘dualism’ does not necessarily imply an opposition between Eros and Thanatos. Rather, life consists in a negotiation between the life and death drives, which must form arrangements with one another in order to coexist in the one organism. Accordingly, this relation is perhaps best characterised as *dialectical* instead of oppositional. After all, the libido first arises, according to Freud, as a ‘modification’ of the death drive that then sets itself against it:

[...] the Nirvana principle, belonging as it does to the death instinct, has undergone a modification in living organisms through which it has become the pleasure principle [belonging to the ‘life instinct’]; and we shall henceforward avoid regarding the two principles as one. (Freud 1961, 160)

Accordingly, life (the organic) issues from death (the inorganic), but then is differentiated and opposed to it, resisting a return to that original state. Nonetheless, death still plays a part in the unfolding of life, as the death drive: the compulsion to restore the organism to that primordial inertia. Likewise, the process by which life emerged from nothingness remains embedded in us, and seeks expression through the drive, which, by definition (according to Freud),<sup>4</sup> attempts to return us to a previous state by means of detours — changes and apparent developments — that lead the organism on its “circuitous path to death” (Freud 1991a, 246). Thus, while the life instincts accord to the demands of the pleasure principle, at the meta-level the pleasure principle itself serves the death drives. Likewise, while the life drives attempt to minimise tension within the system by binding and discharging energy, the death drives increase tension within the organism to serve the end of a greater ‘stability,’ comprising the inorganic state (death). As Freud notes, the life instincts themselves do not serve the progress of the species so much as play out the tragedy of the life that must be lived blindly in its own way, in the face of the inevitability of death.

The ‘opposition’ between the life and death drives breaks down further when we consider the mechanics of the struggle between them. The notion of struggle implies not only that there are differential power relations between the two parties at any one time, but also presupposes instability with regard to the winning position. In short, there can only be

continued struggle if energy is allowed to flow between *Eros* and *Thanatos*, as it is claimed by one or the other, and this itinerant quantity of energy would form the basis for all vicissitudes of the drives. Freud conjectures that this “displaceable and indifferent energy” (Freud 1991b, 466) emanates from the libido, stating that “[t]he erotic instincts appear to be altogether more plastic, more readily diverted and displaced than the destructive instinct” (ibid). Such energy would be either sexually charged, thus serving the libido and forming cathexes; or, desexualised. Freud refers to ‘desexualised’ energy with reference to sublimation, in which case the drive is hindered from forming sexual object cathexes that might be dangerous (with a parent, for instance), and is reoriented to a non-sexual goal. Accordingly, desexualised energy will eventually discharge itself as writing, religious worship, art, or music, among other cultural, intellectual, or even sporting, pursuits.

However, it follows that once libidinal energy is desexualised — or sublimated — it is also ripe to be exploited by the death drives, and thus risks a regression to primary masochism. Freud writes:

[...] when a transformation of this kind [sublimation] takes place, an instinctual defusion [*Triebentmischung*] occurs at the same time. After sublimation, the erotic component no longer has the power to bind the whole of the destructiveness that was combined with it, and this is released in the form of an inclination to aggression and destruction. (Freud 1991b, 475)

By means of sublimation, we can thus establish a connection between highest culture and the death drives: sublimation wears the white hat, but is still implicated with the same impulse that gives rise to neurosis, suicide, and war. I will argue in the next section that the point of coincidence between the destructive drive and sublimation occurs with the super-ego, which is for Freud the paradigm of sublimation.

## II

The superego is commonly represented as an internalisation of the parental figure (or figures), through which the child takes up its place in the social sphere. The superego, as the ‘voice of conscience,’ or ‘morality,’ within the individual, is accordingly understood as an external authority ‘installed within’ the psyche—and so would seem to be an *imposition* of culture upon the body, thus preserving the binary oppositions of inside/ outside, nature/ culture, body/ reason. Freud appears to support this view when, in the 1924 essay “The Dissolution of the Oedipus Complex,” he writes that after the Oedipus complex,

[t]he object-cathexes [with the parent of the opposite sex] are given up and replaced by identifications. The authority of the father or the parents is introjected into the ego, and there it forms the nucleus of the super-ego, which takes over the severity of the father and perpetuates his prohibition against incest, and so secures the ego from the return of the libidinal object cathexis. (Freud 1976a, 319)<sup>5</sup>

The authority of the father, and the severity of the superego are thus imports that henceforth alter the course of subjectivity, ushering the way to reason, morality and language. It would seem then that morality and the law somehow distort what the human animal 'is' essentially, by means of a repression of the drives. Yet, the body must also own the capacity to accommodate, or process, this 'foreign import': to incorporate the father figure into its psychic system, to the extent that it eventually comes to perform one of its principal functions. In *The Ego and the Id*, Freud characterises the superego not only as a piece of culture grafted onto the drive: curiously, the superego is represented here also as a most primitive remnant that returns the individual to his primeval origins:

Owing to the way in which the ego ideal [or superego] is formed, it has the most abundant links with the phylogenetic acquisition of each individual — his archaic heritage. What has belonged to the lowest part of the mental life of each of us is changed, through the formation of the ideal, into what is highest in the human mind by our scale of values. (Freud 1991b, 459)

Accordingly, the "lowest" — most archaic, crudest — portion of the drive is transformed to become the "highest," most sublime: that is to say, the most culturally valuable. This transformation is achieved by means of an interaction between genetic endowment and environmental stimulants. The parent performs a function already designated within the organism, to bring about the crisis (Oedipus complex) at which point the child represses and sublimates their libidinal attachment to one parent, and aggression towards the other,

and is thereby able to take a place in society. This confusion of boundaries between social and biological determinants reveals Freud's conviction, after Ernst Haeckel (1834–1919), that there is an intrinsic connection between phylogeny and ontogeny. Haeckel famously stated that "ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny," meaning that the course of development of the individual will follow that already charted by the species. We have already seen this view reflected in Freud's earlier suppositions about embryology, and the life cycle of birds. The notion that an archaic heritage gives rise to the most lofty of cultural phenomena bears a strong relation, also, to the concept of the death drive, which inevitably returns the organism to its origin by whatever means is available. Freud indicates the possibility of cultural determinants other than the Oedipus complex and the social arrangement to which it corresponds (i.e., the nuclear family) that would then give rise to repression and sublimation. The drive would find its direct path to satisfaction blocked within any social system, precisely because the drive *wants* to return to a previous state, and must find itself stifled in order to do so.

It is against this backdrop that I will now develop the connections between the death drive and the superego. The meaning of sublimation is crucial to the comprehension of the superego. As Freud has stated in the quote above, sublimation opens the psyche to the death drive, because the desexualization of the drive unbinds energy, thus rendering the organism less coherent. But an understanding of the superego presupposes a grasp of the

mechanism of identification, as, according to Freud, the introjection of the parental figure is the very first identification, and organises all possible identifications from that point forward. Freud states on numerous occasions that identification derives from the oral phase of sexual organization, in which the infant assimilates good objects into itself through the nutritive function. For instance, in *Three Essays on Sexuality* (1905) he writes:

The first of these [organizations of sexual life] is the oral or, as it might be called, cannibalistic pregenital sexual organization. Here sexual activity has not yet been separated from the ingestion of food; nor are opposite currents within the activity differentiated. The *object* of both activities is the same; the sexual *aim* consists in the incorporation of the object—the prototype of a process which, in the form of identification, is later to play such an important psychological part. (Freud 1991c, 337)

As with the incorporation of food, when an object is incorporated at the psychical level, the pleasure of its assimilation into the ego is mixed with the pleasure of its annihilation. The infant boy must destroy the father in order to love him, and such a process satisfies both the libidinal and the destructive drives. According to the Oedipal scenario, the little boy already experiences great ambivalence with regard to his father, who, of the parental couple, is not only most like him, but also competes for the same object (that is, the mother). Thus, identification satisfies different registers of the little boy's feelings toward his father. Freud writes in *Group Psychology* (1921) that the little boy's identification

with the father in fact attempts to fulfil his wish to replace the father as the mother's number one suitor. He continues:

Identification, in fact, is ambivalent from the very first; it can turn into an expression of tenderness as easily as into a wish for someone's removal. It behaves like a derivative of the first, *oral* phase of the organization of the libido, in which the object that we long for and prize is assimilated by eating and is in that way annihilated as such. The cannibal, as we know, has remained at this standpoint; he has a devouring affection for his enemies and only devours people of whom he is fond. (Freud 1967, 37)

Accordingly, ambivalence is an essential element of identification, and subsequently also the mechanism of sublimation, and the formation of the superego.

Although Freud touches upon the superego in *Group Psychology*, it is another two years before he develops a mature account of the relation of the superego to the ego, in *The Ego and the Id* (1923). Here the ego itself can be understood as a cluster of sedimented identifications: as with Haeckel's idea that the history of the species is mirrored in the development of the individual, the ego is for Freud "[...] a precipitate of abandoned object-cathexes and [...] it contains the history of those object-choices" (Freud 1991b, 453). The function of identification that the ego performs represents the lost object to the id in order to appease its demands. Freud writes:



When the ego assumes the features of the object, it is forcing itself, so to speak, upon the id as a love-object and is trying to make good the id's loss by saying: 'Look, you can love me too — I am so like the object.' (Freud 1991b, 454)

The ego wants above all to be loved. Freud writes that “[t]o the ego [...] living means the same as being loved” (Freud 1991b, 478). But it only becomes the id's love object by diverting, or sublimating, part of the drive, and repressing the remainder. Ultimately, the id will not reward the ego for managing — and inevitably frustrating — its demands. When the superego emerges, as an incorporation of the father whose strength is to bolster the ego against the id (rather like the cannibal who ingests his enemy in order to appropriate his strengths), the superego also, paradoxically, serves to represent the id's grievances to the ego:

The ego ideal is [...] the heir of the Oedipus complex, and thus it is also the expression of the most powerful impulses and most important libidinal vicissitudes of the id. By setting up this ego ideal, the ego has mastered the Oedipus complex and at the same time placed itself in subjection to the id. Whereas the ego is essentially the representative of the external world, of reality, the super-ego stands in contrast to it as the representative of the internal world, of the id. (Freud 1991b, 459)

If we look to the mechanics of the process of identification, the development of the superego being the exemplary case, it is hardly surprising that the superego might often present as excessively severe, given the child's ambivalence to its object of identification. If the ego takes the father into itself—both devouring and destroying the object—it also

takes on the features of the parental figure that most frustrates the id. Accordingly, the id continues the love-hate relationship it had endured with the father in relation to the ego, and it does so by means of the superego: the voice of conscience that never lets up.

Furthermore, by doing away with the libidinal object, and narcissistically instituting itself as the beloved object, the ego *desexualises* the drive. The cathexis is unbound, and the death drive, which might have been kept in check and coopted by the libido, is released to rampage through the psychic system. This risk is inherent to any act of sublimation: hence stereotypes of the mad genius, or the suicidal artist. The superego — our paradigmatic case of sublimation — can become what Freud refers to as a “gathering place” (Freud 1991b, 474), or “pure culture” (1991b, 473) of the death drive: an over-critical voice that eventually hounds the ego to death, either literally or metaphorically.

Finally, what does the superego’s association with the death drive mean for Freud? The superego, by virtue of this threefold entanglement with the ambivalence of identification, the vengefulness of the id, and sublimation, does not merely serve as the child’s conduit to civilization. Rather, Freud’s more enigmatic claim is that the superego anchors the psyche to its primordial past. The relation of the superego to the death drive — which always returns to its origin — achieves this connection.

## III

I wish to return now to the previous discussion of the dual nature of the superego: as constituting both the “highest” and “lowest” strata of human existence. Such a claim is intriguing not only because of the manner in which it confounds dualism, but it also sheds light upon the historical context, and the scientific culture, in which Freud worked. The undercurrent that both motivates and jeopardises “Beyond the Pleasure Principle,” and is also present in *The Ego and the Id*, is Haeckel’s refrain “ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny”: an idea that, along with Nietzsche’s eternal return, captures the sense of novelty and expansiveness that characterised the post-Darwinian aspect. The most direct of Freud’s statements with regard to Haeckel’s maxim appear in connection with the superego. For instance, he writes in *The Ego and the Id*:

[...] the differentiation of the super-ego from the ego is no matter of chance; it represents the most important characteristics of the development both of the individual and of the species; indeed, by giving permanent expression to the influence of the parents it perpetuates the existence of the factors to which it owes its origin. (Freud 1991b, 458)

[...] the derivation of the super-ego from the first object cathexes of the id, from the Oedipus complex [...] brings it into relation with the phylogenetic acquisitions of the id and makes it a reincarnation of former ego-structures which have left their precipitates behind in the id (1991b, 469)

For Freud, biological residues are played out culturally through the superego, which is both the seat of heredity and of culture within the psychic system. The Oedipal crisis represents to Freud the precise conjunction of our most biological and innate aspect — the id — and the exemplar of culture — the prohibition against incest. Accordingly, its ‘resolution’ is not simple, being born of such mixed parentage. The superego, Freud states, is the “heir” to the Oedipus complex, and so it represents both the repressed wish to possess the mother and the father’s “no.”

Moreover, for Freud the superego — as both the wish and its prohibition — represents, albeit in shorthand, an instance of “ontogeny recapitulating phylogeny,” or the individual realising the destiny of his species in his own development. It is essential to Freud that there be a psychic mechanism that allows us to learn from our predecessors, and so the idea that one’s growth takes us through lessons accumulated over millennia must have appealed to him. This also explains his conviction that when:

The experiences of the ego [...] have been repeated often enough and with sufficient strength in many individuals in successive generations, they transform themselves, so to say, into experiences of the id, the impressions of which are preserved by heredity. Thus in the id, which is capable of being inherited, are harboured residues of the existences of countless egos; and, when the ego forms its super-ego out of the id, it may perhaps only be reviving shapes of former egos and be bringing them to resurrection. (Freud 1991b, 461)

This passage exhibits more of a Lamarkian disposition than Darwinian, yet it captures the *Weltanschauung* of the time. The idea of evolution had exchanged one kind of immortality for another: Freud, a self-avowed atheist, who claimed never to have experienced the ‘oceanic’ feeling associated with religion,<sup>6</sup> found his own spirituality in the death drive.

So, how are we to place Freud’s death drive hypothesis in relation to the greater body of his psychoanalytic research — dominated as it is by that most utilitarian of standards, the pleasure principle? As with today’s ‘meme’ theory — which trades for its meaning upon its association with genetic science — the idea that each individual organism lives through the course of its species’ development, or the notion that the internal motor of life is death, might be considered conceptual misapplications of Darwin’s evolutionary model. Yet, I would contend that the scientific indefensibility of Freud’s appeal to the death drive adds to its value as a concept that might give rise to specifically philosophical insight. With the introduction of the death drive to his battery of concepts, Freud opened the way for an alternative understanding of human being that did not cohere with scientifically observable phenomena, because much about the mind is obscure of *necessity*, and oughtn’t to be reduced to relations of cause and effect. In this later work, as opposed to his earlier, neurological researches, the human animal finally becomes

interesting: irrational, self-effacing, and even cruel, but at least not the seeker of pleasure Freud's earlier subject had been.

#### REFERENCES

Boothby, Richard (1991) *Death and Desire: Psychoanalytic Theory in Lacan's Return to Freud*. New York and London: Routledge.

Freud, Sigmund (1953) "The Uncanny" in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*. Vol. XVII (1917 - 19), trans. James Strachey, ed. London: The Hogarth Press.

\_\_\_\_\_ (1961) "The Economic Problem of Masochism" in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*. Vol. XIX (1923 - 25), trans. James Strachey, ed. London: The Hogarth Press.

\_\_\_\_\_ (1967) *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, trans. James Strachey, ed. New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation.

\_\_\_\_\_ (1973) "Femininity" in *New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*. Pelican Freud Library Vol. 2, trans. James Strachey, ed. Harmondsworth, Middlesex, and Ringwood, Victoria: Penguin Books.

\_\_\_\_\_ (1976a) "The Dissolution of the Oedipus Complex" in *On Sexuality*. The Penguin Freud Library, Vol. 7, trans. James Strachey, ed. Angela Richards. London, New York, and Ringwood, Victoria: Penguin Books.

\_\_\_\_\_ (1976b) "Female Sexuality" in *On Sexuality*. The Penguin Freud Library, Vol. 7, trans. James Strachey, ed. Angela Richards. London, New York, and Ringwood, Victoria: Penguin Books.

\_\_\_\_\_ (1984) "Instincts and Their Vicissitudes" in *On Metapsychology: The Theory of Psychoanalysis*. Penguin Freud Library Vol. 11, trans. James Strachey. London, New York, and Ringwood, Victoria: Penguin Books.

\_\_\_\_\_ (1991a) "Beyond the Pleasure Principle" in *The Essentials of Psychoanalysis: The Definitive Collection of Sigmund Freud's Writing*, trans. James Strachey, ed. Anna Freud. London: Penguin Books.

\_\_\_\_\_ (1991b) "The Ego and the Id" in *The Essentials of Psycho-Analysis: The Definitive Collection of Sigmund Freud's Writing*, trans. James Strachey, ed. Anna Freud. London: Penguin Books.

\_\_\_\_\_ (1991c) "Three Essays on Sexuality" in *The Essentials of Psycho-Analysis: The Definitive Collection of Sigmund Freud's Writing*, trans. James Strachey, ed. Anna Freud. London: Penguin Books.

\_\_\_\_\_ (1991d) "Civilization and its Discontents" in *Civilization, Society and Religion*. Penguin Freud Library Vol. 12, trans. James Strachey, ed. London, New York, and Ringwood, Victoria: Penguin Books.

Lacan, Jacques (1981) *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book XI: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Alan Sheridan, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller. New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company.

---

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Richard Boothby discusses the derisive reception of the 'death drives' concept by such notable psychoanalysts as Otto Rank, David Rapaport, and Ernest Jones (Boothby 1991, 6 – 10).

<sup>2</sup> Freud refers to the "eternal recurrence of the same thing" [*ewige Wiederkehr des Gleichen*] in both "The Uncanny" (Freud 1953, 236) and "Beyond the Pleasure Principle" (Freud 1991a, 231).

<sup>3</sup> In his 1933 lecture on 'Femininity,' from the *New Introductory Lectures*, Freud wrote: "The suppression of women's aggressiveness which is prescribed for them constitutionally and imposed on them socially favours the development of powerful masochistic impulses, which succeed, as we know, in binding erotically the destructive trends which have been diverted inwards. Thus masochism, as people say, is truly feminine." (Freud 1973, 149) In 'The Economic Problem of Masochism,' Freud also characterises femininity as one of the three classes of masochism: "sexual excitation," "the feminine nature," and "a norm of behaviour" (ie. the superego) (see Freud 1961, 161). However femininity is for Freud the most paradigmatic case of masochism.

<sup>4</sup> Freud defines the drive (*Trieb*, translated as 'instinct' by Strachey), as  
"[...] 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.” (Freud 1991a, 244. Emphasis in original)

5 In ‘Female Sexuality’ Freud also writes:

“It is only in the male child that we find the fateful combination of love for the one parent and simultaneous hatred for the other as a rival. In his case it is the discovery of the possibility of castration, as proved by the sight of the female genitals, which forces on him the transformation of his Oedipus complex, and which leads to the creation of his super-ego and thus initiates all the processes that are designed to make the individual find a place in the cultural community. After the paternal agency has been internalised and become a super-ego, the next task is to detach the latter from the figures of whom it was originally the psychical representative...” (Freud 1976b. 375)

6. Freud wrote in *Civilization and its Discontents*: “I cannot discover this ‘oceanic’ feeling in myself. It is not easy to deal scientifically with feelings” (Freud 1991d, 252)

Copyright © 2005 Minerva

All rights are reserved, but fair and good faith use with full attribution may be made of this work for educational or scholarly purposes.

---

*Joanne Faulkner is in the final stages of her Ph.D, at the Philosophy Program, La Trobe University, Melbourne. Her thesis looks at the relation of affect between Nietzsche and his reader, drawing upon psychoanalytic theory. She has published in Diacritics, Contretemps, and in a previous issue of Minerva.*

E-Mail: [j.faulkner@latrobe.edu.au](mailto:j.faulkner@latrobe.edu.au)