

On the pleasure principle¹

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What pleasure can psychoanalysts talk about? Pleasure takes many forms: there is the pleasure of the senses and that of the intellect; aesthetic pleasure and ecstatic pleasure; there is also a «pathic» pleasure, which is not always so pleasant. There is a pleasure that is wellness, harmony with one's own body and with oneself, *euthymia*; and there is a pleasure that is uneasiness, discord between one's body and oneself, *dysthymia*. In investigating the multiple forms that pleasure can take, we should therefore aim to understand the principle which gives rise to these forms, because this is what every investigation sets out to do: to bring the variable phenomena that are presented to our perception back to a meta-phenomenal principle which allows them to be explained.

Freud posited as «pleasure principle» (*Lustprinzip*) the sex drive; and he had placed this principle at the «roots» of psychic life in its conflictual relationship with the *Realitätsprinzip*. Therefore, he had developed a theory which explained the «affects» of pleasure and unpleasure as the psychic derivatives of somatic quantities; from which in turn were derived the ideational processes and cognitive functions through a long and complicated work of mediation between the demands of the body and those of the outside world: psychic reality, in other words, as a product of the dramatic conflict between the *biologikòs kosmos* and the *exoterikòs kosmos*.

This is why we should address this conception, so that we can say whether or not this is what we are still referring to.

The comparison starts with the name chosen by Freud, which is not *Vergnügen*, or *Freude*, delight, contentment, the wellbeing of the soul; but *Lust*, craving, excitation, *Affekt*, which «manifests itself essentially in motor (secretory and vaso-motor) discharge resulting in an (internal) alteration of the subject's own body without reference to the external world» (Freud, 1915). And for Freud, the persistence of this excitation, the inhibition of its free outflow, is what we experience psychically as unpleasure. Today this is certainly an approximate description.

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But the point is that even with that approximate description, Freud brought about a scientific revolution: the explanation of psychic phenomena as natural processes, removing them – as he would claim many times – both from the domain of metaphysics and from the domain of the soul and of consciousness. A naturalistic but not mechanistic conception, since it is not resolved by the simple alternation of discharge and inhibition, but makes that juxtaposition the motor and organiser of the whole development of the psychic apparatus, in that this development essentially consists in the passing from the primary to the secondary process: that is, in the work required by the psyche in order to achieve by an indirect means – through thought – the gratification denied it by means of action.

Thus a continuity was posited between the somatic-quantitative pleasure principle and the psychic-qualitative transformations made necessary by unpleasure.

As we see in this conception, unpleasure is by no means the opposite of pleasure: the two processes, says Freud, are always concomitant; hence, there is in fact a single principle: *Lust/Unlust*. And so its opposite is *nicht-Lust/Unlust*, the abolition of both pleasure and unpleasure, to which the former is inextricably bound. The consequence of this dual suppression is therefore not «pain» but «a-pathy». Bion would later indicate this condition with a minus sign: the opposite of L (Love) is not H (Hate), but -L (Not-Love); and the opposite of H is not L, but -H (Not-Hate). The «minus» sign is used to indicate that hate and love are absent or have been destroyed: the result is «the loss of meaning of the self.»

In other words, love and hate, pleasure and unpleasure, are in the same boat: the meaning of the experience of oneself, proceeds from the presence of both. The loss of that meaning proceeds from the disavowal of both, because meaning is not a function of experience but of the affect which guides the experience. Without affect, the experience is empty, meaningless.

It is an important distinction for the understanding of the phenomena with which we are confronted today, characterised by the flight from pleasure/unpleasure and from the psychic work required by the intersection of the two. This is a disavowal with which we simultaneously abolish the unpleasure of the tension and the obstacle to satisfaction posed by the real and by the Ego Ideal, replacing them with easy alternative rewards: multiplication of things, relationships, meaningless facts. Not representations or sublimations, but evacuations and actions which do not wish to know anything more about unpleasure.

For this reason, I believe that sexuality, even today, with its pleasure and unpleasure, is still *skàndalon*, obstacle to the interests of the Ego and consciousness, since sexuality does not depend on the subject and the intentionality of consciousness, nor even primarily on its objects, but on the power of an instinct, a *vis a tergo* acting on the determinations and choices of the subject, which is in the truest sense *sub-iectum*, subjected, to it.

Socrates: «How I wish I could be free from Eros! – Why do you say that, Socrates? – Because Eros is a cruel tyrant.»

I would say we are like Socrates in our persistent attempt to free ourselves from it, banishing it from the theory and practice of analysis, reinstating the subject of consciousness, its qualities, interests, and objects: a banishment of the body's and sexuality's centrality as the motor of psychic life and its vicissitudes.

Are we heading towards a neo-spiritualism? This was the question that André Green used to ask in his last years: do psychoanalysts still need sexuality? Do they need to anchor their discourse with the «chains of Eros»? Apparently not, judging by the progressive *aphanisis* of its traces in our papers and our case studies, where it is replaced by a disembodied notion of feeling-affect which preserves only the name of the original concept of *Affekt*. This is implicit most of the time, but sometimes explicit, as in Westen's claim that People need relationships not orifices; an assertion of such glaring obviousness that we would all easily agree with it, until we remind ourselves that psychoanalysis in fact arises from its inversion: Relationships need orifices! Hence, we could ask ourselves what relationship we are talking about when it is separated from the relationship of bodies, setting up once again the old soul-body dualism – it makes little difference if we call them mind and brain.

I have wondered for a long time about Freud's enigmatic claim, «Psyche is extended; knows nothing about it» (Freud, 1938c). I used to consider the word «extended» as an attribute, and so I thought the phrase was intended as a reaffirmation that the psychic does not coincide with the conscious, but has unconscious extension, and this is why it «knows nothing». But, Freud clarifies the stronger sense of the phrase, which is that being «extended» is not an attribute of the psyche, but a «property»: in other words, that the psyche is *res extensa*. «But that is precisely what psycho-analysis is obliged to assert,» he writes in 1938, «and this is its second fundamental hypothesis. It explains the supposedly somatic concomitant phenomena as being what is truly psychical, and thus in the first instance disregards the quality of consciousness» (Freud, 1938a). Hence, the meaning I had given to the phrase had to be reversed: it says that the nature of the psychic is specifically physical, and this is why it knows nothing about itself (it is unconscious).

Thus Freud also rejected any mitigated form of the dualism which attempts «to assume that there were organic processes parallel to the conscious psychical ones, related to them in a manner that was hard to explain, which acted as intermediaries in the reciprocal relations between “body and mind”, and which served to re-insert the psychical into the texture of life. But this solution remained unsatisfactory [...] psychical phenomena are to a high degree dependent upon somatic influences and on their side have the most powerful effects upon somatic processes. [...] The psychical, whatever its nature may be, is in itself unconscious and probably similar in kind to all the other natural processes of which we have obtained knowledge» (1938b).

So this is the postulate: for us, *res cogitans* and *res extensa* are the same *res*, somatic processes which constantly emerge and express themselves in psychic processes along a single continuum. Of this continuum, says Freud, we only know the two extremes, «its bodily organ and scene of action, the brain (or nervous system) and, on the other hand, our acts of consciousness, which are immediate data [...] Everything that lies between is unknown to us» (1938a). So, the task is to fill in this caesura, to know what stands «between these two terminal points»: not the somatic, not the psychic; not the unconscious, and not consciousness; but the processes of derivation through which they determine each other.

This task cannot be achieved by investigating only one of the two extremes: «In view of the intimate connection between the things that we distinguish as physical and mental, we may look forward to a day when paths of knowledge and, let us hope, of influence will be opened up, leading from organic biology and chemistry to the field of neurotic phenomena» (Freud, 1926). There is a fine book by Vittorini, *Il Sempione strizza l'occhio al Frejus*, which recalls the legendary undertaking of those labourers who at the start of the last century tunnelled through the Alps to join Italy with Europe. That is how I think of us, psychoanalysts and neuro-scientists: as being like those tunnellers advancing from two opposite directions through a single resistant and opaque material. And so? We have to dig; and each of us must do so with our own drill moving towards those who are coming from the other direction. Whether or not we meet will depend on how much we dig and investigate, but also on the maps which guide us through our investigation. The maps are the theories we make use of, and the method is the drill. So, we need to sharpen our drill and develop our maps, because we will not take a single step forwards except where they lead us. And I think that today, after years of 'anything goes', psychoanalysis needs to know where it's going, needs cognitive redemption.

The idea I have tried to convey is that, by being firmly anchored in the biological root of psychic life, the pleasure-unpleasure principle maintains the central function which Freud assigned to it, as the motor of the processes of transformation through which, by the uninterrupted flow of somatic-affective quanta, the need to «think» is generated, along with the development of psychic functions oriented to the reality principle and the relationship with the external world.

Our experience with our patients, no less than with ourselves, shows us how this relationship is always at risk of being lost in favour of the *biologikòs* or the *exoterikòs*, of pressures coming from within or from without, determining the loss of the route that leads from one to the other.

Therefore, it should remain our objective, both scientific and clinical, to comprehend the two-way transformations between somatic and psychic, unconscious and conscious, internal and external. Without this, psychoanalysis runs the ever-present risk of losing its own identity and finding itself back in that world of facts, relation-

ships, feelings and conscious behaviours, from which it had emerged to seek explanations elsewhere.

SUMMARY AND KEYWORDS

The idea developed in this brief paper is that the pleasure-unpleasure principle, being anchored in the biological roots of psychic life, maintains the central function that Freud assigned to it: that of the original and driving force of the process of transformation through which – from the sum of somatic-affective quantities – the psychic qualities and cognitive functions oriented to the reality principle and the relationship with the external world are developed. The double nature of this relationship is always at risk of being lost in favor of the pressures stemming from the inside and those from the outside, bringing about a loss of comprehension of bidirectional relationships between somatic and psychic, unconscious and conscious, internal and external. Without these, psychoanalysis runs the risk of losing its own identity and instead finding itself in the world of conscious actions, feelings, and behaviors, from which it had emerged to seek explanations elsewhere.

KEYWORDS: *Affekt, Lust-Prinzip, sexual theory, somatopsychic processes, Unlust.*

SUR LE PRINCIPE DE PLAISIR. L'idée développée dans ce travail est que le principe de plaisir-déplaisir, pour son fort ancrage aux racines biologiques de la vie psychique, maintient le rôle central que Freud lui attribuait, en tant que source et moteur du processus de transformation à travers lequel, à partir du montant de «quantités somatiques-affectives», se développent les qualités psychiques et cognitives orientées vers le principe de réalité et la relation avec le monde extérieur. La double nature de cette relation est toujours à risque d'être perdue en faveur des pressions provenant de l'intérieur ou de l'extérieur, entraînant la perte de compréhension des relations bi-directionnelles entre somatique et psychique, inconscient et conscient, intérieur et extérieur, à défaut de quoi la psychanalyse est en danger de perdre son identité et de se retrouver dans un monde des faits, des sentiments et des comportements conscients, d'où elle était partie pour chercher ailleurs l'explication.

MOTS-CLÉS: *Affekt, Lust-Prinzip, processus somatiques-psychiques, théorie sexuelle, Unlust.*

SOBRE EL PRINCIPIO DEL PLACER. La idea desarrollada en este breve trabajo es que el principio de placer-displacer, por su fuerte anclaje en las raíces biológicas de la vida anímica, mantiene la función central que le asignó Freud de origen y motor del proceso de transformación por el cual, desde la cantidad somático-afectiva, se van desarrollando las cualidades psíquicas y las funciones cognitivas orientadas al principio de realidad y a relacionarse con el mundo exterior. La doble naturaleza de esta relación está siempre en peligro de perderse a favor de las presiones internas o de aquellas procedentes del exterior y así se produce la pérdida de comprensión de las relaciones bidimensionales existentes entre lo somático y lo psíquico, el inconsciente y el consciente, el interior y el exterior. En ausencia de ésta, el psicoanálisis corre el riesgo de perder su identidad y terminar en ese mundo de hechos, sentimientos, y actitudes conscientes desde donde comenzó a buscar en otro lugar la explicación.

PALABRAS CLAVE: *Affekt, Lust-Prinzip, procesos somáticos-psíquicos, teoría sexual, Unlust.*

VOM LUSTPRINZIPS. Die entscheidende Idee in dieser kurzen Arbeit ist, dass das Lust-Unlust-Prinzip, wegen seiner starken Verankerung an den biologischen Wurzeln des Seelenlebens, die zentrale Rolle behält, die Freud ihm zugewiesen hatte und zwar von der Quelle und vom Motor des Transformationsprozesses, durch den vom Aufhäufen an somatisch-affektiver Menge entwickeln sich psychische Qualitäten und kognitive Funktionen, die sich an dem Realitätsprinzip und an der Beziehung mit der äußeren Realität orientieren. Der duale Charakter dieser Beziehung ist immer in Gefahr verloren zu gehen, zugunsten von Druck, der sowohl aus dem Außen als auch aus dem Inneren kommen kann. Das verursacht den Verlust an Verständnis von bidirektionalen Beziehungen, zwischen Somatischem und Psychischem, Unbewusstem und Bewusstem, Innen und Außen, andernfalls ist die Psychoanalyse in Gefahr ihre Identität zu verlieren und sich in der Welt der Tatsachen, bewusster Gefühle und Verhaltensweisen wieder zu finden, von denen sie an anderer Stelle die Erklärung suchte.

SCHLÜSSELWÖRTER: *Affekt, Lust-Prinzip, Sexual Theorie, somatisch-psychische Prozesse, Unlust.*

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