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Reinterpreting *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*: Lacan's Reconstruction of Freudian Death Instinct

Our age has seen the gradual demise of psychoanalysis and the ridicule towards its founder, Sigmund Freud, as an amusing quasi-neurologist and simultaneously unbearable sexist outcasted in the discourse of scientism. The TIME magazine on November 29, 1993, even asked, "Is Freud Dead," on its cover. It is a shame that a great mind of the 20th century has received its undeserved contempt regarding his efforts at exploring human mental and psychic apparatus. It is even a greater shame, that one of Freud's later theoretical work, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, is completely ignored in popular psychoanalysis publications. At the same time, however, the twentieth-century French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan's work on excavating Freud's theoretical potential and his proclamation of *Le retour à Freud* has been a great hope, drastically shaping the intellectual landscape of humanities and contributing to the influential theoretical traditions of post-structuralism.

This paper examines two problems, logical leap from repetition to regression and questionable biological discussions, in Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. I argue that these problems can be resolved through introducing Lacan's conception of the Real: the Freudian death instinct is the desire and *jouissance* to restore the Objet petit a rather than a biologically inanimate state. Lacan's reformulation leads to a radical ontological thesis of

human subjectivity, and it contains significant cultural implications for the ideology of racism, fascism, film theory, and the ethnic conflicts among nation-states.

Freud's Death Instinct in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*

Consistent with the earlier formulation of the fulfillment of wish in the *Interpretation of Dream*, Freud sets out his discussion by positing the pleasure principle. Framed in metapsychological terms of quantity and bound of excitation, pleasure is referred to as "a diminution" of the quantity of excitation, whereas unpleasure "corresponds to an increase" (Freud 4). Accordingly, the pleasure principle is the endeavors of the mental apparatus "to keep the quantity of excitation present in it as low as possible or at least to keep it constant" (Freud 5). In other words, the pleasure principle seeks to return to a state of stability and mental homeostasis, following the principle of constancy (Freud 6).

Given the "strong tendency towards the pleasure principle" of the human mind, it does not necessarily follow that human everyday experiences are "accompanied by pleasure or lead to pleasure" (Freud 6). In fact, there is a reality principle that usually postpones the satisfaction and tolerates temporary unpleasure "as a step on the long indirect road to pleasure" (Freud 6). Aside from the effect of the reality principle, another source of unpleasure merits close attention. In the course of life, Freud argues, "individual instincts and parts of instincts turn out to be incompatible in their aims or demands with the remaining ones, which are able to combine into the inclusive unity of the ego" (8). These former instincts are then subjected to the process of repression. Once these repressed instincts succeed in achieving satisfaction, they are "felt by the ego as unpleasure" (8). The deliberate efforts of the repressed instincts to gain satisfaction, as I will elaborate in the next section,

anticipate the Freud's discussions of the death instinct in later passages and Lacan's reconstruction of the repressed as Das Ding (the Thing).

Freud then goes on to present a number of observations that clearly contradicts the pleasure principle hypothesis: "the traumatic dreams of the war neurotic, the presence/ absence game of the child abandoned by its mother, the joy taken by the masochist in his own mistreatment, and the so-called negative therapeutic reaction indicated an order of satisfaction" (Boothby 3). Taken as a whole, these observations lead Freud to propose a new hypothesis, phrased throughout the passage from ego instincts to death instincts, that "an instinct is an urge inherent in organic life to restore an earlier state of things" (43). This restoration has a biological flavor, as Freud argues that all living substances are supposed to return to an inorganic state "till the decisive external influences altered in such a way as to oblige the still surviving substance to…make ever more complicated *détour* before reaching its aim of death" (46).

The above deduction from the compulsion to repeat to the restoration of an earlier state of things appears to be most suspicious, and it is such deduction that leads Freud into a questionable biological discussion. It does not follow from the compulsion to repeat, or the repetition, that the restoration can be properly inferred. In other words, "Without the addition of some other factor, there is no reason to suppose that the tendency toward repetition also involves a tendency to reach into the more and more distant past. past. Repetition does not necessarily imply regression" (Roothby 80). Far from being unaware of such a logical leap, Freud himself comments that his "assertion of the regressive character of instincts also rests upon observed material—namely on the facts of the compulsion to repeat. It may be, however, that I have overestimated their significance" (71). Such an invalid logical inference of "repetition-regression to inanimate state" necessarily leads Freud to object the possibility

of death as a late acquisition of organisms, leading him away from psychological discussions to metabiological inquiries that appear problematic.

Does the failure of Freud's logical fallacy and biologism imply the uselessness of death instinct? The answer given by Jacques Lacan is a decisive no: "for to ignore the death instinct in his [Freud's] doctrine is to misunderstand that doctrine entirely" (*Ecrits* 230). The next section will demonstrate how the theoretical potential of Freudian death instinct lies not in its biological contributions but in the positing of a radical ontological thesis of human subjectivity (Dufresne 115).

Lacan's Reconstruction of Death Instinct

Lacan's appropriation of Freud's death instincts has been repetitively changing over his course of teaching, and it is extremely difficult to provide a definitive stance of Lacanian death instincts, as Lacan himself is against systematic regularization. This paper focusses exclusively on the later teaching of Das Ding (the Thing), objet petit a, and jouissance to try to get a glimpse into Lacan's most difficult ideas of the constitution of the subject in the register of the Real and how it is related to Freud's death instincts.

Given the word constraints, a brief account of Lacanian three register—the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real—that requires some prior knowledge is given as followed: The realm of the Imaginary is the misrecognition of "an illusory unity of ego" among prelinguistic psychic terrain of conflict and discord that corresponds to Freud's discussion of primary narcissism (Homer 31). Through identifying with his mirror image, for instance, the "lure of spatial identification," of a unified entity, the child rejects the nature of fragmentation of self that creates a primary loss that constitutes an ontological lack in the core of our being (as cited in Homer 25).

Inspired by Saussurean structural linguistics, Lacan introduced the register of the Symbolic as the existing social reality shaped through linguistic discourses. The famous claim—"the unconscious is the discourse of the Other"—represents an attempt to de-essentialize human subject as being caught in the chain of signification that determines the subject rather than the reverse (Homer 44-45). Such a symbolic realm socializes the human subject through a dialectical movement of mutual recognition through the medium of language, and it refers to the "complicate *détour*" in Freud's discussion of death instincts. It is, however, through the process of the Oedipal complex that the Name of the father is assumed by the child to have phallus, the object of mother's desire rather than a physical organ, so that the child enters into the symbolic order through the substitution of the signifier of "the desire of the mother" to "the Name of the father" (Homer 55-57). The Lacanian Name of the father is the socio-symbolic law that prohibits the child's desire for the mother that develops the superego as the internalized father (Homer 57-58).

Now we have embarked upon the Real. It is "in Seminar VII, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* (1959-1960) Lacan's … order of the real is 'that which resists, the impossible, that which always come back to the same place, the limit of all symbolization'" (as cited in Critchley 198). The Real is the guarantor of Das Ding, or the Thing, which is "the beyond-of-the-signified" (Lacan, the ethics of psychoanalysis 54). It is the "dumb reality" and "an 'object that is nowhere articulated, it is a lost object, but paradoxically an object that was never there in the first place to be lost' (1992 [1986]: 58)" (as cited in Homer 85). In other words, the Thing immediately represent the desire to fill the gap in the symbolic chain, and it is precisely what Freud means by the repressed:

> Let us not forget that repression still posed a problem for Freud. And everything that he will subsequently say about repression, in its extraordinary sophistication, can only

> be understood as responding to the need to understand the specificity of repression compared to all the other forms of defense. It is then in relation to the original *Ding* that the first orientation, the first choice, the first seat of subjective orientation takes place, and that I will sometimes call *Neuronenwahl,* the choice of neurosis. (Lacan, the ethics of psychoanalysis, 54).

What is repressed can therefore be Das Ding. It is later denoted as Objet petit a, "the cause of desire in the subject" (Critchley 198). Objet petit a is "as Parveen Adams writes: '… it is a 'hole' in that chain. It is a hole in the field of representation, but it does not simply ruin representation. It mends it as it ruins it. It both produces a hole and is what comes to the place of lack to cover it over' (1996a: 151)" (as cited in Homer 88).

Given the above formulation, how can we make sense of the death instincts as the compulsion to repeat or the restoration of an earlier state of things? It follows from Lacan that "we are not driven *towards* death but *by* death" (Homer 89). In other words, it is the abyss and void in the center of our being, the Objet petit a, that lures us to restore an earlier state of things (to fulfill the primary loss and the hole in the symbolic order). Death, the inanimate state, or the earlier state of things, in Lacan's sense becomes the Real, which is the death of socio-symbolic order. It is the desire to seek more beyond the symbolic realm to restore the loss. The Freudian formulation of death instinct can thus be rephrased as the desire of the restoration to the objet petit a, the hole in the symbolic chain, that renounces the pleasure principle in the socio-symbolic reality. However, Objet petit a, as the equal of Das Ding, is something that the "subject keeps it distance" to (Lacan, ethics of psychoanalysis, 54). Therefore, we are always driven by the desire to Objet petit a without ever reaching it, as it is the repressed that may be "felt by the ego as unpleasure" (Freud 8). It is in this sense that we are driven *by* the desire of death, as understood in Objet petit a, rather than *towards* death.

What specifically, then, is the desire? According to Lacan, desire is not to be satisfied, but to be enjoyed——"an essential dimension of *jouissance*" (As cited in Evans 5). In other words, we enjoy the act of desiring itself rather than the satisfaction of the object of desire:

> desire lacks an object that could satisfy it, and is therefore to be conceived of as a movement which is pursued endlessly, simply for the enjoyment (jouissance) of pursuing it. *Jouissance* is thus lifted out of the register of the satisfaction of a biological need, and becomes instead the paradoxical satisfaction which is found in pursuing an eternally unsatisfied desire. (Evans 5)

Jouissance, crudely understood as enjoyment, is what sustain desire, "since it is the enjoyment of desiring for desire's sake that keeps one desiring in the absence of satisfaction" (Evans 5-6). Such repetitive desiring constitutes the constancy of *jouissance* (Homer 90). It is here that Freud's logical leap from repetition to regression is reunited through the formulation of *joussiance* and desire: *Jouissance*, the enjoyment of desiring itself, leads to the compulsion to repetitive desiring, and the desiring of the loss in the symbolic chain is the regression to Objet petit a. It is the key to notice that the compulsion to repetitive desiring is painful, as the desire of Objet petit a is the desire of the repressed, and the desire can never be fulfilled: there is always a primary loss.

So far, the reformulation of Freud's two concepts of repetition and regression through Lacanian Real and *jouissance* has resolved the problem of questionable biology and invalid logical inference in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. There is also a potential for a new metaphysics of human subjectivity in Lacan's discussions of Objet petit a, *jouissance*, and desire; that is, the subject is ontologically constituted by various desiring that can never be satisfied, and it is predisposed to a lack that leads to a paradoxical jouissance that contains both pleasure and pain. In this light, Lacanian subject challenges against the classical

utilitarian picture of subject as *homo economicus*, as it simultaneously rejects the existential thesis of Sartrean authenticity, positing itself in the Western traditions of subjectivity as a distinctive theoretical tradition.

Cultural Implication of *Jouissance*

There is yet another dimension to *jouissance*. According to Homer, "in assuming that it is there and that we are lacking it we generally attribute it to the Other. The Other is believed to experience a level of enjoyment beyond our own experience" (90). In other words, we attribute an excessive *jouissance* to the Other, and this is the *jouissance* of the Other.

Such a formulation has significant cultural implications. According to Evans, "*jouissance* is not merely a private affair but is structured in accordance with a social logic, and moreover that this logic changes over time, presumably by virtue of some economic or other determinant" (20). Simultaneously, "On the one hand. we need to preserve the jouissance of the Other in order to be able to define our own; but on the other hand. we seek to destroy that Other enjoyment because we suspect it may be more superabundant than our own" (Evans 20). With the rise of contemporary multiculturalism, different cultural groups, for instance the dominant Western culture, each constitutive of different *jouissance* of the Other, may define one another "as 'underdeveloped,' to distrust his mode of jouissance and 'imposing our own on him," leading to the ideology of racism (Evans 20). Similar applications can be extended to film theory, the logic of fascism and anti-Semitism, and especially the ethnic problems of nation-states, for instance, the on-going Syrian Kurdish problems in 2019.

Conclusion

The theoretical vigor of *jouissance* and desire has both its cultural implication and the theoretical strength to account for human psychic reality. Through reframing Freud's death instincts regarding repetition and regression in a Lacanian fashion, significant theoretical potentials are excavated in the text of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*: the Freudian death instinct leads to a philosophically radical and distinctive position in human subjectivity. The speculative difficulties in Freud's text are also properly resolved regarding logical fallacy and unsound biological discussions.

One limitation of this paper lies in its ignorance of Derridean deconstruction in interpreting Freudian-Lacanian psychoanalysis. According to Dufresne, "Derrida accuses Lacan of inventing a kind of 'new metaphysics'—complete with reference to authenticity, Being, and so on—that he himself had spent his time deconstructing" (128). It will be better to incorporate Derrida's theory of writing and deconstruction of Western metaphysics.

Psychoanalysis, then, at least leaves its deep intellectual traces in the academia of humanities. It remains for the future to evaluate its legacy and its full potential, as the emergence of the Zizekian school of psychoanalysis and neuropsychoanalysis partially reorients the attention of our age. Let's hope it will develop as what Freud in *An Autobiographical Study* anticipates — "all the signs point to the proximity of further developments in the same direction" — if not to ignore Derrida's alarming critique (69).

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