

Death Drive, Repetition Compulsion, and Primary Masochism: A Possible Link?

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Abstract

This article takes up the 1920 Freudian text, Beyond the Pleasure Principle, to think about how psychic life is described in terms of drive imbrication or the connection between libido and the death drive and to suggest that the compulsion to repeat pain and displeasure can be thought of as an attempt to reestablish the primary masochism, which for some reason would have failed.

Keywords: life drive, death drive, repetition, primary masochism

1. Introduction

Faced with the difficulties of Freud's drive dualism (Laplanche 1988; Monzani 2014; Widlöcher 1988; Giacoia 2014) and under the influence of Deleuze (Deleuze 2006, 2009) and Foucault (2002), this article is part of broader research that investigates the hypothesis that it would be possible to understand the difference between the life drive and the death drive in empirical and transcendental terms. These categories allow us to think that the organism, and in particular the psychic apparatus, has two functions that could be methodologically differentiated: a transcendental function of destruction and an empirical function of construction (Noto 2021).

On the one hand, we find in the psychic apparatus a function that leads to the complete elimination of excitation and tension; a transcendental function that 'would partake of the most universal tendency of

all living matter - to return to the peace of the inorganic world'¹ (Freud 2010: 237). This function would designate the regressive purpose of what Freud calls the death drive. On the other hand, from the moment a being *lives*, the death drive is tamed and transformed thanks to its encounter with the life drive. Due to its constructive tendency that allows the psychic apparatus to establish connections, units, syntheses, and, ultimately, bonds, the life drive prevents the being from returning to the inanimate state, that is, from dying. This constructive tendency of life would be governed by what Freud calls the pleasure principle, which, more than completely eliminating tension or displeasure, seeks to keep them constant or, at least, as low as possible.

According to Freud, the life drive and the death drive are intertwined in intimate communion since the beginning. Therefore, if it makes sense to think of this dualism in terms of 'empirical/transcendental', then we can say that the life drive is always a current tendency of the function of the death drive; a tendency to divert it from its goal or at least delay or postpone it as much as possible.

But if this is so, if the life drive as a tendency that resists death has been active since the beginning, the challenge that arises is to understand how it would still be possible for us to speak of Eros with respect to those psychic phenomena in which the regressive and destructive function of the death drive seems to reign alone in the psychic apparatus. Where, after all, can we find life and love in hatred, aggression, sadism, and melancholy? Where would the pleasure be in masochism, in the repetitions of traumatic neurosis or the so-called neurosis of destiny?

Following the model of an issue stated by Freud himself in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (how can sadism, which wants to inflict pain on

¹ All quotations in this text are our translations of the Brazilian Portuguese versions of the works.

others, be derived from love?), the aim is to understand the imbrication between life drive and death drive in those psychic phenomena linked to suffering, pain, and displeasure. In this text, I seek to investigate the relationship between life and death drives in the phenomenon of repetition compulsion and in the phenomenon of primary masochism. It is about considering Freudian writings and thinking that life and death are, from the beginning, in intimate communion, or how Green wants, 'being alive is a testimony to the pre-eminence of the combined action of drives' (Green 2007: 3). With this, we will conclude that the primary masochism can be thought of as an original moment of communion between the life and death drives and that the repetition compulsion can be understood as an attempt to reestablish this first connection, that is, as an attempt to return to the primary masochism.

2.

In the article entitled 'Masochism and Disease', published in 2004 in the *Revista de Psicanálise da Sociedade Psicanalítica de Porto Alegre*, the French psychoanalyst Benno Rosenberg states that a successful analysis translates into 'the ability to withstand the excitation [...] demanding thus a greater masochistic capacity' (Rosenberg 2004: 296). In other words, masochism would be a sign of psychic health and even healing.

For Rosenberg, the primary masochism described by Freud in 1924 in 'The Economic Problem of Masochism' would be paradigmatic of the 'law of the psychic phenomena' (299), insofar as it concerns the meeting of the two drives: life drive and death drive.

It is in terms of drive imbrication that Freud defines the primary masochism in the 1924 text. Such masochism, the psychoanalyst guarantees, also called erogenous, since it implies pleasure with displeasure, concerns the first libidinal connection that occurs with the death drive. In other words, it concerns the first encounter between the life

drive and the death drive, or even the first transformation or taming that the libido promotes in the death drive. From then on, we would have an eroticized death drive. Freud confirms: 'This masochism, then, would be a witness and survival of that phase of formation in which occurred the amalgamation, so important for Life, Eros and the death instinct' (Freud 2011: 192–193).

Rosenberg proposes the primary masochism as a 'defense of the living being and the psychism against the death drive' (Rosenberg 2004: 293); a defense even prior to the defense of projection, which will constitute sadism: 'Masochism is, therefore, a condition to allow the defense through projection' (*Ib.*). In other words, eroticizing displeasure, or libidinizing the death drive, would be the first defense we have to tame or mitigate the tendency towards Nirvana. It would be a sign that, instead of total discharge, we are capable of enduring displeasure and tension. Primary masochism, therefore, would have the function of preserving health and psychic life; otherwise, Rosenberg guarantees: 'When masochism fails, there is psychic illness' (292).

Considering this reading about primary masochism, I would like to return to the 1920 Freudian text, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, to show how psychic life is also described in terms of drive imbrication or the connection between libido and the death drive and suggest that the compulsion to repeat pain and displeasure be thought of as an attempt to reestablish the primary masochism, which for some reason would have failed.

3.

As known, Freud begins his text *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920) by resuming the thesis, already present in the *Project for a Scientific Psychology* (1895), that the psychic apparatus tends to discharge in order to eliminate the increase in tension and the displeasure resulting from this. He recognizes, therefore, that the displeasure felt with the

increase in tension and the pleasure obtained with the discharge is the 'guide' for the functioning of the psychic apparatus. And if the functioning modes of the psychic apparatus are divided into primary and secondary processes, Freud will say that the primary processes, more archaic, are regulated by the principle of obtaining pleasure: 'the pleasure-principle is adjusted to a primary mode of operation on the part of the psychic apparatus' (Freud 2010: 165) or 'The primary processes are also the earlier in point of time [...] and we may conclude that if the pleasure-principle were not already in action in respect to them, it would not establish itself in regard to the later processes' (237).

However, despite all our efforts in search of pleasure, Freud notices situations in which displeasure, more than pleasure, dominates the psychic apparatus. Throughout the text, he precisely wants to understand some situations that contradict the pleasure principle. As Monzani (2012, 2014), Simanke (2006), and Caropreso (2006, 2012) show, the primacy of displeasure and pain in the origin of psychic functioning is one of the main theses that the 1920 text (*Beyond the Pleasure Principle*) resumes from that of 1895 (*Project for a Scientific Psychology*).

The first two situations analyzed by Freud concern those in which there is displeasure in one psychic instance and pleasure in another. For example, when the Id must withstand displeasure because the reality principle requires us to postpone or avoid instinctual satisfaction or when the Ego must withstand displeasure because a sexual drive has been satisfied.

Freud, however, identifies other situations in which displeasure reigns in the psychic apparatus. These are the cases in which the psychic apparatus demonstrates a compulsion to repeat unpleasant situations that did not present any gain in pleasure, in any psychic instance: the child who repeats the absence of their mother in a children's game, the war soldier who does not stop having dreams with traumatic

scenes, and patients who resist improvement in the analysis and insist on repeating, in transference, unwanted situations and painful emotions. What intrigues Freud is the fact that even though they are unpleasant, subjects tend to repeat painful experiences from the past in a substitutive way:

The new and remarkable fact that we have now to describe is that the repetition-compulsion also revives experiences of the past that contain no potentiality of pleasure, and which could at no time have been satisfactions, even of impulses since repressed (Freud 2010: 179).

Thus, Freud's question is: why repeat these unpleasant experiences, which did not provide pleasure to any psychic instance? Do these cases not contradict the thesis, held until then, that psychic life is governed by the pleasure principle and tends towards pleasure?

Indeed, these cases observed by Freud in the clinic bring into question precisely the primacy of the pleasure principle: 'there really exists in psychic life a repetition-compulsion, which goes beyond the pleasure-principle' (183). Therefore, it is necessary to understand the relationship between this repetition compulsion and the pleasure principle, 'Till then, the other task of the psychic apparatus would take precedence, viz. to obtain control of or to bind the excitation, not in opposition to the pleasure-principle but independently of it and in part without regard to it' (184).

As we know, in the 1920 text, it is through the notion of the death drive that Freud tries to justify and explain the compulsion to repeat experiences of displeasure, not so much to oppose the thesis that desire or the pleasure principle is the regulating principle of psychic life, but to indicate that behind this regulating and empirical principle, there

would be another principle, a transcendental one, that would make it possible

Based on the Biology of the time, which distinguished between two types of cells, somatic cells, which tend to die and return to an inorganic state, and germinative cells, which tend to reproduce life, Freud also recognizes two contrary tendencies in the psychic apparatus: one that tends to death, another that tends to life. That is, a conservative tendency to return to the previous stage of life, with zero tension (death drive), and a progressive tendency to remain living or coexisting with a certain level of tension (life drive).

According to Freud, the repetition compulsion is beside the death drive, it comes from the conservative nature of the living being, it is the 'conservative instincts compelling repetition' (203). With this, we would have: on the one hand, the death drive, the tendency to regression/conservation and repetition compulsion, and on the other, the life drive, the tendency to progress and pleasure.

Saying, however, that the compulsion to repeat displeasure is at the service of the death drive does not seem to be enough to understand what happens in cases where it is present, nor its relationship with the pleasure principle. After all, as Freud insists, in psychic life the life drive and the death drive are inseparable. That is, where there is one, there is the other. Life drive and death drive never appear in a pure way, but are always, from the beginning of life, mixed, intertwined, amalgamated, there is 'between the two types of instincts an intense mixture and amalgamation, variable in its proportions, so that we must not rely on pure death and life instincts, but only a mixture of them in different degrees' (Freud 2011: 192)².

² Regarding this amalgam, Freud also states in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*: 'it remains possible that the instincts which are later described as sexual were active from the very beginning and took up the part of opposition to the role of the 'ego-instincts' then, and not only at some later time' (Freud 2010: 208); 'the sexual instinct became for us transformed into Eros [...] this Eros is at work from the

But if this is so, if the life drive and the death drive are inseparable, how can we understand the compulsion to repeat the displeasure that Freud insists to be born from Thanatos? How can we understand that in the attachment to pain, suffering, and displeasure there is something of the order of the life drive? Where in the 3 aforementioned cases of repetition compulsion would be the amalgamation between life and death? Let us see.

3.1. Children's game

The easiest case seems to be that of the baby who repeats in a substitutive way, through the game of making it disappear and appear, the unpleasant experience of their mother's absence. According to Freud, through repetition, that is, through the game, the baby can psychically elaborate the painful experience and thus obtain pleasure. Freud suggests that pleasure comes from the ability to 'abreact the strength of the impression and so to speak make themselves masters of the situation' (Freud 2010: 175). This is thanks to an inversion process. The child goes from a passive to an active situation; by taking control of bad feelings, they can actively play with them. This activity even allows the baby to take revenge on the mother: if in reality, it is the mother who abandons the child, in the game, it is the baby who 'throws her away'. What we see here, says Freud, is that 'the repetition compulsion and direct pleasurable satisfaction of impulse seem there to be inextricably intertwined' (183). Repeating displeasure through an *inversion* provides pleasure: the child 'repeats even the unpleasant experiences because through his own activity, he gains a far more thorough mastery of the strong impression than was possible by mere passive experience' (200).

beginnings of life, manifesting itself as the "life-instinct" in contradistinction to the "death-instinct" which developed through the animation of the inorganic' (235).

But if with the example of children's game it is easy to identify the connection between the repetition compulsion and the pleasure principle, after all, repetition here is a 'source of pleasure' (201), in the two other cases analyzed by Freud, the relationship is more problematic because pleasure is not directly achieved in them. Thus, the question that arises is the following: given the 3 cases of repetition compulsion analyzed by Freud in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, is it only in the case of the children's game that the repetition compulsion is also at the service of the life drive or is it that, in general, repetition compulsion can and should always be thought of in the light of life? The hypothesis here is that even repetitions that do not directly generate pleasure have a vital function: even if they are independent of pleasure, they are not indifferent to it as they respond to a more primordial need to create conditions for pleasure. Even if they are not repetitions accompanied by pleasure, they provide the conditions for it: the connection between the life drive/libido and the death drive. We shall see.

3.2. Traumatic dreams

The second case analyzed by Freud in the 1920 text refers to war soldiers who never stop dreaming of the traumatic situations of war. The notion of trauma is essential here. According to Freud, trauma refers to a situation in which there was an excess of excitation and stimulus in the face of which the subject remains paralyzed, without feeling apprehension. Trauma, therefore, is understood as a situation in which there is terror and threat to life, with the absence of apprehension.

Just as great physical pain requires a large investment of energy, horror, and life-threatening situations would also require an overinvestment that would function as a 'barrier against stimuli' (Freud 2010: 195). This would be the role of apprehension: to overinvest excess stimuli and turn them into a sign of imminent danger, a sign that would require a certain specific action from the psychic apparatus. Thus, as

Freud claims, 'psychologically link the quantities of stimuli that erupted in order to lead to elimination' (192).

Well, with the case of war soldiers and traumatic neurosis, Freud realizes that the compulsion to repeat unpleasant situations through dreams has the purpose of developing apprehension. Dreams, in these cases, therefore, do not respond to the principle of pleasure and the fulfillment of desire, but to a more primordial need to connect or order intense impressions, generating apprehension. Traumatic dreams, therefore, 'are attempts at restoring control of the stimuli by developing apprehension', confirms Freud (195).

But then, if in the case of traumatic dreams, the repetition of displeasure does not imply any gain in pleasure and is not subordinated to the pleasure principle, can we say that in them the repetition compulsion is only at the service of the death drive? Could it be that, despite Freud insisting that the life drive and the death drive are always together, would we not have here an example of a pure death drive, a pure regressive tendency, a pure tendency towards the total discharge of tension? Maybe not. To the extent that apprehension provides a psychic link, it can be thought of as an effect of the life drive which, as we know, is responsible for the synthetic functions of the psychic apparatus. Furthermore, apprehension can even be thought of as a condition of pleasure. After all, as Freud claims, it is only after the binding that the pleasure principle can 'assert its sway without hindrance' (199).

In this sense, even if the repetition of the unpleasant trauma does not generate pleasure, but apprehension, it is a condition for pleasure, a condition for which the 'pleasure-principle can begin its sway', as Freud says (195). This is a possible binding between the repetition compulsion and the life and death drives in cases of traumatic neurosis.

3.3. The transference

The last case of repetition compulsion analyzed by Freud concerns the so-called destiny neurosis in which the subject cannot stop repeating unwanted situations and painful emotions. This is not simply the repetition of what is repressed as a current experience; after all, this would be a case of repeating something that is displeasure for one system and pleasure for another. Repeating what is repressed can cause displeasure to the Ego, on the other hand, it gives pleasure to the Id. It is also the repetition of experiences that in no instance generated pleasure, only displeasure, such as, for example, the feeling of inferiority linked to a narcissistic wound such as the loss of love or a failure regarding the limits of a sexual foray (Freud 2010). Why, after all, do we repeat and cling to typical childhood situations such as situations of disappointment, jealousy, and disdain?

The answer, perhaps, is similar to that of the previous cases: repetition is not necessarily to obtain pleasure, but to achieve what makes pleasure possible – a psychic binding. Based on Monzani's observation that the 'movement of analogical transposition' is frequent in Freud, we can think of the case of destiny neurosis in analogy with previous cases and also see in it the search for a psychic binding, a *Bindung*. The cases described by Freud of unpleasant repetitions through transference indeed seem to point to a situation in which repetition would operate independently of the pleasure principle or, as Monzani (2014) stated, in its pure form of expression, a repetition that produces neither pleasure (as in the case of the children's game) nor apprehension (as in the case of traumatic neurosis). However, following Freud's warning that drives never appear in a pure way, it would be necessary to assume that even with this third case of transference, we would have the binding tendency in operation. It would be repeated, also in these cases, in order to obtain, retrospectively, a connection that initially did not happen, that for some reason failed.

As Monzani (2014), Giacoia (2014), and Derrida (2007) show, the notion of binding (*Bindung*) is essential in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. According to Monzani, binding is what guarantees and works as a condition for pleasure: 'Even before being able to operate any type of defense or discharge, it is necessary to bind, connect, this invading impulsive energy. It is necessary to tame it, make it treatable before thinking about unloading it or repressing it' (Monzani 2014: 173). According to Giacoia 'binding is the means by which the psychic system can prevent the free flow of affluent excitation' (Giacoia 2014: 60). For Derrida, '*Bindung* is a preparatory act (*vorbereitender Akt*) to the exercise of the pleasure principle. As such, it is not yet about the pleasure principle, it only prepares the ground for the dominance of the latter' (Derrida 2007: 441).

Now, from this idea of the *Bindung* as a preparatory act for pleasure, it seems that it is possible to affirm that also in the cases of neurosis of destiny, the repetition of pain and unpleasure, although it does not directly generate pleasure, is an attempt to create the conditions for it. In the same way that the production of anguish in traumatic dreams would be a retrospective attempt to 'psychologically link the quantities of stimuli that erupted in order to lead to elimination' (Freud 2010: 192), the repetitions, in transference, in the cases of destiny neurosis, would also be an attempt to retrospectively reestablish some psychic connection. As in the case of Green's patient (2007), who, unable to deal with the excess of excitation from a childhood scene, relives, in the silence of analysis and with the analyst, the paralysis and discomfort of a traumatic moment. In this sense, although the last type of repetition described by Freud, that of the neurosis of destiny, does not directly generate satisfaction, it would not be completely indifferent or independent of the pleasure principle insofar as it would consist in an attempt to create the conditions for it. Therefore, alongside the death drive and the tendency to regression,

we would see the life drive and a tendency to connect; thus, the repetition compulsion is also a binding compulsion.

4.

Resuming the question of primary masochism, we could try to understand this repetition compulsion 'beyond the pleasure principle' as a binding compulsion, in terms of primary masochism, that is, in terms of an incessant search for that primordial connection between the death drive and libido. If Rosenberg is right in saying that 'every instinctual intricacy is fundamentally masochistic' (Rosenberg 2004: 293), perhaps we can think that the compulsion to repeat pain and displeasure, as an attempt to retrospectively connect excess excitation, does not cease to be a retroactive attempt to establish primary masochism which, for some reason, would not have been established. Thus, if we call *desire* the compulsion to repeat primordial experiences of pleasure in a substitutive way, the name we could give to the compulsion to repeat primordial experiences of pain and displeasure would be *primary masochism*.

Understanding the compulsion to repeat pain and displeasure in terms of primary masochism seems interesting, as it allows us to think that this type of repetition, more than mortal, would be an attempt to defend against death; an attempt to establish a first defense, perhaps the most archaic, and therefore the most fundamental, against death: that of the primary connection between life and death, between pleasure and displeasure. In this context, we must insist, the compulsion to repeat pain and displeasure would not only be understood as a tendency to return to death but also as an attempt to avoid it; an attempt to deviate from it by enduring, taming, and connecting, that is, eroticizing or libidinizing, the excess of excitation (the trauma), through children's games, the generation of apprehension or transference.

Thus, if this attempt to think of the compulsion to repeat pain and unpleasure as a compulsion to reestablish the primary masochism makes sense, it is necessary to recognize that when we repeat experiences of pain and displeasure, we do not simply seek to get rid of discomfort and tension as quickly as possible, but we seek, through some possible connection, to live with the excess excitation that we were initially unable to bear. In this sense, we agree with Lacan when he states that the masochist works 'like a horse' (2021: 195). We recognize, therefore, that it is psychic work or bonding that is at stake when the baby repeats the absence of the mother through play, when the soldier produces dreams of anguish, and when the neurotic repeats childhood traumas through transference. These psychic works that, more than the total draining of tension, require us to endure and live with a certain discomfort, with a certain displeasure. That is, they demand us to sustain a masochistic position that we were not initially able to endure.

With this, it is concluded not only that the repetition of displeasure and pain can be understood as a retroactive attempt to reestablish the primary masochism, but that the compulsion to repeat displeasure is not governed only by the death drive. Together with the transcendental principle that drives psychic life to inertia and death, the empirical principle of psychic life is also present in the repetition of pain and unpleasure; where this repetition is invested with libido and is still an attempt at connecting, ordering, and, finally, acting or defending against death.

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