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Narcissism and the Pleasures of Extinction: For the Centenary of “Beyond the Pleasure Principle”

Summary:

Taking advantage of the hundredth anniversary of the first publication of Freud’s controversial essay ‘Beyond the Pleasure Principle’, this paper questions why this seminal text has proven so difficult to read and examines its enduring significance for the contemporary state of the human condition. It is demonstrated that the key paradox pervading Freud’s essay is not that there is a death drive which operates beyond the pleasure principle, but that it is the libidinal investment of the ego, in the form of narcissism, which drives the human life form towards its own extinction. It is argued that the more a living organism is narcissistically invested in protecting its own existence, the more it is at risk of unwittingly facilitating and expediting its annihilation, because auto-sexual investment does not contribute to solid community building, creative cross-fertilisation and progressive revitalisation. Even though this first, biogenetic axis of Freud’s ontogenetic theory is extended with an equally controversial, anthropogenetic axis in Moses and Monotheism, the first axis is already routinely rejected owing to its traumatic impact on the reader’s own narcissism. This process of repression and displacement of Freud’s message is equally, and perhaps even more at work during these unprecedented times of a global, human-made pandemic, because narcissism may be more prevalent now than it was one hundred years ago, driven by the accumulative economic conditions of global capitalism.

Nam Sibyllam quidem Cumis ego ipse oculis meis vidi

in ampulla pendere, et cum illi pueri dicerent: ???????

?? ??????; respondebat illa: ?????????? ????

Petronius, *Satyricon*, 48

Introduction

Over the past ten years, the Freud Museum London has regularly organised special exhibitions, conferences and workshops celebrating the consecutive centenaries of some of Freud’s key essays, the most recent one in the series offering visitors an opportunity to re-discover his hugely influential 1919 paper ‘The “Uncanny”’ (Freud 1919*h*). For 2020, it was never in any doubt that a diverse programme of events should be planned around the hundredth anniversary of the publication of ‘Beyond the Pleasure Principle’, a text which perhaps more than any other work by Freud has attracted vehement rebuttals from within the psychoanalytic

community (with the exception of Melanie Klein, Jacques Lacan, Jean Laplanche, André Green and a few others) and which continues to divide psychoanalysts and philosophers alike for its explicitly speculative proposition of a ‘death drive’—an allegedly clinically irrelevant, theoretically inconsistent and morally objectionable hypothesis.[1] Indeed, even though Freud’s essay contains quite a few conceptual innovations, including the ‘compulsion to repeat’ (*Wiederholungszwang*), the ‘*Fort/Da*-game’ and the ‘Nirvana principle’, it has become virtually synonymous with its title’s unpalatable suggestion of a drive that supposedly operates ‘beyond pleasure and pain’, ‘beyond life’ and, as the text’s reception has amply demonstrated, ‘beyond reasonable comprehension’.

Of all the centenary celebrations at Freud’s final home, the one on ‘Beyond the Pleasure Principle’ I had been most looking forward to, precisely owing to the distinctly pungent and remarkably caustic scent that still lingers over these words. As an early reviewer stated, “as to practical application [of the relation between the death drive and the life drive], which I feel we are entitled to ask for, there is no suggestion of it” (Silverberg 1988[1925]), yet does this imply that the clinical relevance of the essay is null and void? Can ‘Beyond the Pleasure Principle’ really be regarded (or discarded) as but another of Freud’s meta-psychological explorations, or does it by contrast highlight a crucially important and routinely ‘forgotten’ dimension of the human condition, namely that of an implacable drive to self-destruct, which practising psychoanalysts can only ignore at their peril?[2] And what are we to make of Jacques Derrida’s emphasis on the repetitive textual inscription of Freud’s semi-autobiographical, speculative procedure (Derrida 1987[1980]), both in the context of the ‘life death’ of the psychoanalytic movement (Freud’s legacy) and with reference to the peculiar rhetorical quality of his arguments (Freud’s limping intellectual legs and his unusually tentative conceptual legwork)?[3] Does it really matter that “the findings of biology in fact do not support the theory of the death instinct as Freud conceived of it” and that Freud “deploys speculative metabiological theory of the most dubious sort”, as Joel Whitebook (2017, p. 349 note 22 & p. 361 note 58) has claimed, since Freud never reduced the human drives to purely biological mechanisms?

On 23 March 2020, the eagerly anticipated commemoration of ‘Beyond the Pleasure Principle’ was overtaken by events and as things stand it is quite unlikely that the programme will ever be reinstated, even if the Freud Museum London were to reopen to the public at full capacity. Although it is perfectly possible to run a successful conference via one or the other virtual platform, Museum staff have been furloughed, the entire annual events calendar has been overhauled, and financial pressures have required an in-depth review of strategic priorities. Strange as it may sound, it would appear that the centennial of Freud’s death drive will never have happened on account of the British government’s decision to impose a nationwide lockdown in a desperate effort to save lives. Were the celebration of the death drive to have taken place in all its expansive glory, it could have potentially resulted in numerous deaths, a risk that no one would have been able to estimate exactly in its likelihood and consequences, but which no one could have been perceived to ignore, let alone be willing to take. In addition, any attempt at recovering some of the lost excitement over the anniversary of a text in which life is not merely balanced against death, but fundamentally driven by it—at a time when the human life form exists at the edge of extinction, and the end of the world as we used to know it is more at stake than ever before owing to a deadly, human-made pandemic—now probably runs the risk of being received as a terribly sick joke.[4] In actual fact, maybe the best way to celebrate the death drive’s centenary is to avoid any celebration at all: *requiescat in pace*.

Be that as it may, in this essay I wish to share some thoughts for the times on the enduring impact of ‘Beyond the Pleasure Principle’, its alleged difficulty as a paradoxical meta-psychological text and its contemporary relevance for the precarious status of the human condition. In short, I shall argue that the text constitutes the first stage of Freud’s psychoanalytic account of human ontogeny, notably the stage of ‘biogeny’ (the coming into being of life). This would be followed nineteen years later, shortly before Freud’s own death, by the second stage of ‘anthropogeny’ (the coming into being of humanity) in his equally controversial book *Moses and Monotheism* (Freud 1939a), which is rhetorically at least as, if not more repetitive and hesitant as ‘Beyond the Pleasure Principle’, and which also elicited vigorous criticism inside as well as beyond the psychoanalytic community, again for all the wrong reasons perhaps. Although I will not be able to unfold the full extent of Freud’s dual ontogenetic theory, even less the way in which the

anthropogenetic law re-activates, by deferred action, the biogenetic hypothesis, both parts of the theory have been thoroughly rejected—even by those who have claimed to honour the Freudian death drive in all its uncomfortable repercussions—in an act of displacement from those traumatic points in the texts where the real issues and conflicts emerge. Indeed, I shall endeavour to demonstrate that what is really at stake in these texts has little or nothing to do with the death drive *per se* or, in the case of the Moses book, with the founder of Judaism purportedly being an Egyptian, but with the question of narcissism—Freud’s own narcissism for sure, but also the place and function of narcissism within his theory of the drives, and the narcissism of his audience, by extension all those trying to come to terms with the central message of these disturbing works. Put differently, if ‘Beyond the Pleasure Principle’ is generally considered to be an argumentatively incoherent, logically inconsistent, self-contradictory text—much like Freud’s later effort to develop a radically revisionist account of the origins of the Jewish religion—I shall argue that these critical considerations divert the attention away from the actual traumatic core, which is to be situated in both cases, albeit at different levels of the ontogenetic process, in the human predicament of narcissism.

In ‘Beyond the Pleasure Principle’, Freud proposes a theory of the traumatic nature of life; in *Moses and Monotheism* he offers an explanatory hypothesis for the traumatic nature of becoming human (*die Menschwerdung*) (Freud 1939a, p. 75 & 113).[5] In both cases, narcissism, which is conceptualised as the libidinal cathexis (*Besetzung*) of the ego by the sexual drives, not only comes to complicate the picture, but effectively interferes with the pleasure principle much more than the death drive, the compulsion to repeat, or any other clinical occurrence (repetitive nightmares, for instance) that we may identify as operating ‘beyond’. Here too, I shall substantiate this idea primarily with reference to ‘Beyond the Pleasure Principle’, yet it is equally at work in Freud’s later, anthropogenetic theory. Whether it concerns the trauma of life or the trauma of becoming human, narcissism serves the purpose of consolidating, maintaining and extending human life and thus, by definition, all sources of tension, conflict and opposition. However, I shall also argue that there is an even darker side to this narcissism beyond the pleasure principle. Counter-intuitive as it may be, narcissism does not resolutely oppose the death drive, which Freud unmistakably designates as the living organism’s tendency to return to an earlier, inanimate state of functioning, but allows it to operate uninterruptedly, undisturbedly, undisputedly. More radically, even, the extent to which narcissism constitutes an investment in the prolongation of (individual) life is directly proportional to the death drive’s ferocious attempt at seeing it being annihilated. In sum, it is not simply life (or the advent of humanity) that fuels the death drive, but life in its restricted focus on self-preservation. The more a living organism is narcissistically invested in protecting and advancing its own existence, the more it is at risk of unwittingly facilitating and expediting its own extinction. This, I shall claim, is the true paradox of ‘Beyond the Pleasure Principle’, which would later be recuperated and reintegrated in the anthropogenetic theory of *Moses and Monotheism*, in which the death drive can be detected in the intractable and ineluctable installation of an internal psychic disjunction at the point of the emergence of humanity, for which Freud’s ‘Moses the Egyptian’ constitutes the foundational allegory.

Protestations and Diversions

Ever since ‘Beyond the Pleasure Principle’ saw the light of day, became *Da* as a written product of Freud’s mental labour, towards the end of 1920, it has been claimed repeatedly that this slim volume is one of the most difficult texts in Freud’s entire oeuvre, although it is seldom clear wherein this attributed difficulty exactly lies and why it would apply more dramatically to this text than to other parts of Freud’s work.[6] Abstract and intellectually demanding as the essay may be, Freud’s theoretical exposition in it constitutes an explicit extension of his earlier meta-psychological papers and ventures into psycho-physical and physiological territories which had already been adumbrated in such hugely popular works as *The Interpretation of Dreams* (Freud 1900a) and the *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (Freud 1905d). ‘Beyond the Pleasure Principle’ is unapologetically speculative, yet many of these speculations extend propositions that were already firmly in place in the famous *Project for a Scientific Psychology* (Freud 1950a [1895]) which, although it was only published after it had been reeled back in following Freud’s initial *Fort*

of the manuscript (and posthumously for that matter, after Freud himself was no longer *Da*), did not attract nearly as much criticism as the later text.

In his acclaimed biography of Freud, Peter Gay offers four reasons for the difficulty of Freud's volume: "[1]The prose is as lucid as ever, though the compression of new ideas into the briefest compass offers obstacles to the reader's quick comprehension. [2]More unsettling is Freud's yielding to flights of the imagination as uninhibited as any he had ever undertaken in print. [3]The reassuring intimacy with clinical experience that marks most of Freud's papers, even at their most theoretical, seems faint here, almost absent. [4]To make matters more troubling still, Freud drove his familiar protestations of uncertainty to new lengths" (Gay 1988, p. 398). Anyone who has ever read 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle' will probably agree with these explanations, yet the first three are unquestionably valid for other meta-psychological papers too, whereas the third one only makes sense if we make abstraction of Freud's intermittent references to traumatic neurosis and the obstructive force of the compulsion to repeat in the clinical psychoanalytic setting. The fourth reason is by far the most interesting one here, because it invokes the relationship between Freud as a thinker and his audience, between the writer and the reader, between the writer's explicit admission of profound uncertainty and the reader's persistent exploitation of this uncertainty in order to dispute the validity of the writer's ideas. As it happens, the matter is even more complicated than that, and I shall return to it below.

Why is the *Dasein* of 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle' so heavy? Why is it so unbearably troubling that many readers have just wanted to do away with it altogether, turning its *Dasein* into a *Fortsein* that would ideally erase the traces of its very historical existence? Isn't the text difficult primarily owing to a certain resistance on the part of the reader him- or herself—an obstinate reluctance to accept the text as it is, in the bare nakedness of its *Dasein*? This ongoing refusal to recognise the text (in contents as well as in form, in substance as well as in style) is perhaps not only evident in those who have categorically rejected it, but also in those who have unequivocally accepted it, to wit, those who have rendered it *Da* in the fullest acquiescence of Freud's willingness to throw caution to the wind.

In this respect, almost all psychoanalysts and scholars who have accepted the death drive as a cornerstone of the psychoanalytic edifice have simultaneously felt the need to 'explicate', to 'clarify', to 'render intelligible' its modus operandi by overlaying it with another text, by replacing the original text with an alternative interpretative framework that would allegedly be better suited than Freud's own (meta-)biological paradigm. As such, whilst being allowed to exist, the death drive is cleverly recuperated, but also surreptitiously annihilated, within the substitute discourses of phenomenology (Butler 1990[1987]), structural linguistics (Lacan 1992[1986]) and German idealism (Žižek 2006). Žižek's take on the death drive is by far the best example, here, of this recuperative annihilation of the Freudian text: "[T]he Freudian death drive has nothing whatsoever to do with the craving for self-annihilation, for the return to the inorganic absence of any life-tension; it is, on the contrary, the very opposite of dying—a name for the 'undead' eternal life itself, for the horrible fate of being caught in the endless repetitive cycle of wandering around in guilt and pain. The paradox of the Freudian 'death drive' [*sic*] is therefore that it is Freud's name for its very opposite, for the way immortality appears within psychoanalysis, for an uncanny *excess* [*sic*] of life, for an 'undead' urge which persists beyond the biological cycle of life and death, of generation and corruption" (Žižek 2006, p. 62).[7] Each and every aspect of this statement is, of course, blatantly incorrect. Or, to put it more precisely, each and every aspect of this statement is only correct in Žižek's own (mis-)reading of the Freudian text. For Freud himself, there is absolutely no doubt that a drive "*is an urge inherent in organic life to restore an earlier state of things [ein dem Belebten Organischen innewohnender Drang zur Wiederherstellung eines früheren Zustandes]*" and that "*the aim of all life is death [Das Ziel alles Lebens ist der Tod]*", because "*inanimate things existed before living ones [Das Leblose war früher da als das Lebende]*", whereby "*the organism wishes to die only in its own fashion [daß der Organismus nur auf seine Weise sterben will]*" (Freud 1920g, pp. 36, 38 & 39).[8] If there is a paradox running through 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle', then it is definitely not situated here. Rhetorical quips aside, Freud never retracts his belief that all living matter is fundamentally animated by a tendency towards the cancellation of its own existence as a living organism, pervaded by an involuntary, autonomic, parasymphathetic intentionality to

return to an inorganic state, irrevocably driven towards its own extinction. I cannot prove it, but the paradox Žižek detects in the Freudian text may be nothing more, nothing less than an externalisation of his own tension and discomfort at having to accept that such a self-annihilating urge might indeed exist at a biological level. In short, under the guise of rescuing the Freudian death drive from the clutches of those who feel it should be indiscriminately discarded as a speculation too far, Žižek (but he is by no means alone in embracing this strategy) only accepts it on condition that it can be killed off, turned into its opposite, rendered extinct in its original form. As a reader of Freud's text (even though we may wonder how generous a reader he really is), Žižek is effectively in the same position here as the patients Freud alludes to in the third section of his essay: those who resist following the path where Freud is leading them, those who prefer not to remember the trauma of life owing to a certain resistance on the part of the unconscious ego, which remains exceedingly keen to preserve the workings of the pleasure principle (Freud 1920g, pp. 19-22).

Where does this resistance to the text stem from? Why are these additional protective layers put in place by those who are purportedly open to Freud's speculations? How are we to explain that even those who claim to keep the death drive alive are only capable of doing so by virtue of first rendering it extinct? Is it that 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle' would otherwise penetrate in full force through the reader's conventional defence mechanisms, from the inside or from the outside, and remain 'unbound' ('freely mobile') in the stimuli and excitations that it generates? Could the reading of Freud's text be traumatic in itself, because it somehow succeeds in capturing, bringing to light and giving expression to a repressed truth which, owing to the transformation of affect, can only be experienced by the reader as a source of unpleasure? Could it be that this is exactly where Gay's fourth reason for the difficulty of 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle' should be situated?

As I suggested above, Gay's assertion that, in his essay, "Freud drove his familiar protestations of uncertainty to new lengths" (Gay 1988, p. 398), is only part of the problem. On the one hand, it is true that Freud, at the end of the sixth section of his text, after having reached the culmination of his arguments, categorically admits that he himself does not know to what extent he believes in them (*ich weiß nicht, wie weit ich an sie glaube*) and that his own attitude towards his propositions "cannot well be other than one of cool benevolence [*bleibt wohl nichts anderes als eine Kühles Wohlwollen für die Ergebnisse der eigenen Denkbemühung möglich*]" (Freud 1920g, p. 59). Although this self-professed hesitation on the part of the writer may indeed be employed against him to dismiss the outcome of his speculations as a demonstrably unsteady construction, one may only marvel at Freud's candour in sharing with his readership the strength of his own doubtfulness. As Derrida has suggested, Freud's final concession to the repetitive imposition of intellectual uncertainty does not just represent Freud's final step in a continuously limping, forward movement of thought, but also his ultimate drawback from the position where his speculative efforts had led him to (Derrida 1987[1980], pp. 381-386). Precisely at the point where Freud announces that "the moment has come for breaking off [*es ist hier die Stelle, abzubrechen*]", he does not break off, but retraces his steps, with "a few words of critical reflection" (Freud 1920g, pp. 58-59).[9]

However, this may not be where the real problem of Freud's "protestations of uncertainty" lies. What comes across as much more disturbing than Freud's ostensibly sincere self-criticism is his blunt refusal to acknowledge it as a necessary and sufficient reason for being more tolerant towards alternative points of view. Freud writes: "I hasten to add, however, that self-criticism such as this is far from binding one to any special tolerance towards dissentient opinions [*nicht zu besonderer Toleranz gegen abweichende Meinungen verpflichtet*]. It is perfectly legitimate to reject remorselessly [*unerbittlich*] theories which are contradicted by the very first steps in the analysis of observed facts, while yet being aware at the same time that the validity of one's own theory is only a provisional one" (Freud 1920g, pp. 59-60). 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle' questions, stretches and ultimately overturns what the theory of psychoanalysis, which was notably invented by Freud himself, has taught, yet Freud has no reservations in presenting himself as the only one who can perform these operations and emerge from it relatively unscathed, or only susceptible to the damage that he is willing and able to inflict upon himself. In this way, 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle' not only emphasizes what Freud has been able to derive by way of the 'Fort/Da'-game from his observations as a grandfather, but also highlights what Freud is authorised, or authorizes himself to do thanks to his position as the father of the

discipline he is putting to the test: killing off certain parts of it in order to create new, allegedly more accurate hypotheses, whilst simultaneously preventing other people from doing the same.[10]

Narcissism Beyond the Pleasure Principle

On 27 May 1920, Freud wrote to Max Eitingon: “I’m currently correcting and completing the ‘Beyond’, namely that of the pleasure principle, and I find myself in a productive phase again. *Fractus si illabatur orbis, impavidum ferient minae* [*sic*]. It’s all a matter of mood, as long as it lasts” (Schröter 2004, p. 207). Contrary to what the reader who does not understand Latin may think, the phrase following the Latin sentence in this quote is neither a direct translation nor a paraphrase of it. In this letter, Freud did not offer Eitingon a translation of the Latin, which appears at the beginning of the third ode (*Iustum et tenacem*) in the third book of Horace’s *Odes* (2004, p. 146).[11] He seems to have been rather fond of it.

In his *Reminiscences of a Viennese Psychoanalyst* Richard F. Sterba reported on a memorable meeting of the Vienna Psychoanalytic Society held on 20 March 1930, in which someone (Sterba admitted that he could not recollect exactly who) discussed Freud’s recently published ‘Civilization and Its Discontents’ (Sterba 1982, p. 113; Freud 1930a).[12] Sterba did not recall either what exactly the presenter had said of Freud’s book, or considered it insufficiently important to be included in his narrative, but he vividly remembered, perhaps because it was so unusual, how Freud had intervened immediately after the presentation, in order to formulate two major criticisms of his own work. The first ‘self-reproach’, which was already twofold, concerned his belief that he had not treated his subject matter exhaustively enough and that he had overcompensated for this lack by adding an overly complicated psychoanalytic theory of guilt to the rather flawed and superficial account of the discontents in civilization. In Freud’s second ‘self-reproach’, he had then drawn attention to a “significant defect” in his book, which his close followers had completely failed to notice. Freud’s comments, as reproduced by Sterba, are worth quoting in full, if only because the harshness of their tone and their curious admixture of self-deprecation and absolute authority resonate with the “protestations of uncertainty” at the end of ‘Beyond the Pleasure Principle’. Thus spoke Sigmund Freud: “None of you has noted one omission in the work, and this is a gigantic disgrace. I myself noticed it only after the book was already printed. My omission is excusable. But not yours. I had good reason to forget something that I know very distinctly. If I had not forgotten it, but had written it down, it would have been unbearable. Thus, it was an opportunistic tendency that expressed itself through this forgetting. The forgotten piece belongs to the possibilities of happiness; in fact, this is the most important possibility because it is the only one that is psychologically unassailable. Thus, the book does not mention the only condition for happiness that is really sufficient” (Sterba 1982, p. 114).

At this point, I can imagine the honourable members of the Vienna Psychoanalytic Society looking utterly bemused, not daring to volunteer a guess, probing into the deepest recesses of their own carefully crafted knowledge and understanding, and wondering in silence which forgotten yet ‘unassailable condition’ for happiness Freud possibly could have had in mind. Could they even remember all those he had *not* forgotten? The list had not been very long, so there could have been quite a few other ‘possibilities of happiness’, but which one of these would have been ‘unbearable’ to admit to in writing? Which one of these truly deserved the epithet ‘unassailable’? Prolonged sexual satisfaction? Probably not, because Freud had openly conceded that he himself knew the ‘forgotten condition’ ‘very distinctly’. Having been through a psychoanalytic treatment? Even less likely, because Freud himself had never been in analysis and he had always been notoriously restrained about the curative outcomes of a treatment process. It is unclear from Sterba’s report how long Freud left his audience in a state of suspense, yet to make matters worse he did not put them out of their misery by offering a clear answer to his own riddle, quoting the line from Horace instead: “*Si fractus illabatur orbis, impavidum ferient ruinae*” (Sterba 1982, p. 114).[13] Sterba noted that Freud routinely assumed that his associates were sufficiently well versed in Latin to understand citations such as this one, but that on this occasion he offered his own translation: “*Wenn der Himmel über ihm einstürzt, so wird er ohne Furcht die Trümmer auf sich fallen sehen*”. [14] Rendered back into English, Freud’s German

translation might read: “Were the heavens to break and fall upon him, he shall see the fragments bury him without fear.” In a modern English translation of Horace, the verse is: “If the round world were to break and fall about him, its ruins would strike him unafraid” (Horace 1997, p. 78).[15]

I can imagine the honourable members of the Vienna Psychoanalytic Society still looking utterly bemused, their mystification now turning from embarrassment to despair, and their bewilderment becoming more uncomfortable by the minute. What on earth is the connection between this line from Horace and the ‘unassailable condition’ for happiness Freud had tragically omitted from ‘Civilization and Its Discontents’? Maybe Horace’s man had been able to withstand the fragmentation of the heavens, but the *éminences grises* of the Vienna Psychoanalytic Society were not as well equipped as he was when their own knowledge was falling apart and they were being told off by the master for not being able to stand their ground. Surely, Freud could not have been thinking of fearlessness? Again, Sterba did not say for how long Freud left his audience in a state of suspense, but he reportedly went on: “This possibility of happiness is so very sad. It is the person who relies completely upon himself. A caricature of this type is Falstaff. We can tolerate him as a caricature, but otherwise he is unbearable. This is the absolute narcissist. This unassailability by anything is given only to the absolute narcissist. My omission is a real defect in the presentation” (Sterba 1982, p. 114).[16] Could one hear small sighs of relief gradually pushing away the silent tension in the room? Did anyone chuckle? Did someone say that narcissism had been on his mind all along? Did anyone protest? Did someone try to console Freud by saying that he had not completely forgotten about narcissism in ‘Civilization and Its Discontents’, because it had featured prominently in the sixth section, in which Freud had discussed the advances in his libido-theory as well as his reasons for abandoning the distinction between the ego-drives and the sexual drives (Freud 1930a, p. 118)? Sterba himself remained silent about the direct impact of Freud’s announcement on his followers, but nonetheless revealed that he himself had later come to the conclusion that Freud had quoted the verse out of context and had “definitely misinterpreted their meaning” (Sterba 1982, pp. 114-115). Horace’s fearless man is not an absolute narcissist, Sterba contended, but rather someone who “obtains his fearlessness and his emotional fortitude . . . from the strength of his moral convictions” (Sterba 1982, p. 115). However, whether Horace’s man is an absolute narcissist or someone whose moral fibre is made of mithril—as if the two options would be *de facto* mutually exclusive—is a moot point. In quoting Horace, Freud did not intend to make a philological contribution to the semantic analysis of the third ode, but merely relied on a lyrical figuration of the just man in the poet’s allegory of tenacity and fair-mindedness in order to capture the nature of his own tragic omission in his enumeration of the possibilities for human happiness.

Hence, when Freud quoted Horace in his letter to Eitingon of 27 May 1920, he essentially conceded that his narcissism had saved him from collapsing under the crushing weight of the crumbling atmosphere surrounding him—Freud’s daughter Sophie had died at the age of twenty-six on 25 January that year, after she had fallen victim to the ‘Spanish flu’ pandemic, and five days earlier his protégé, former patient and wealthy benefactor Anton von Freund had died of cancer at the age of forty (Jones 1957, p. 40). Either Eitingon did not understand Freud’s learned allusion and was too reserved to insist on an explanation, or he did not think it appropriate to comment further on the painful losses that had befallen Freud in the space of less than a week, and so Horace silently disappeared in the creases of their correspondence. However, when Freud admonished his followers on 20 March 1930 for having failed to detect the major defect in ‘Civilization and Its Discontents’ which he, Professor Sigmund Freud, knew “very distinctly”, he may have been involuntarily reminded of how his own narcissism had rescued him during those intensely dark months following the almost simultaneous deaths of two of his most beloved life-companions, and he may have also been encouraged to claim ‘distinct knowledge’ of the subject matter on account of the detailed study he had devoted to the topic shortly before the outbreak of the Great War (Freud 1914c). Maybe he was also drawn again to those passages at the end of ‘Beyond the Pleasure Principle’ in which he had categorically refused to listen to dissenting views—they shall be rejected remorselessly (*unerbittlich*)—despite his own apparent misgivings about the validity of his theoretical speculations. In 1930, Freud claimed it would have been unbearable for him to put narcissism in writing amongst the possibilities of human happiness, but it had clearly been quite acceptable for him to do so ten years earlier, allusively in his letter to Eitingon and

implicitly in his first addendum to his speculations on the death drive—written, in the latter instance, after the moment for ‘breaking off’ (*abzubrechen*) had arrived, by way of a pseudo-self-critical codicil.

What kind of man would go so far as to suggest that he is the only one who has the right to question his own theories, who only really questions his own theories under the guise of an *advocatus diaboli*, who would go so far as to admit that his speculations are in all likelihood governed by “deep-rooted prejudices” (*innerlich tief begründeten Vorlieben*) if only to immediately emphasize that this shall not make him more tolerant towards “dissentient opinions [*abweichende Meinungen*]” (Freud 1920g, p. 59)? What kind of man would open a book by saying that he has been instructed to make assumptions by the theory he himself has invented and that no other philosophical or psychological theory has ever had anything to offer to him that could serve his purposes?[17] What kind of man would end a book by saying that science can never be a substitute for religion and that the scientific investigator should always be allowed the privilege to develop (*die Fortbildung*) or transform (*die Umbildung*) his views, whilst he has made it quite clear that he himself, as the creator of his own work, should be the only one, and thus the One and only, to do so (Freud 1920g, p. 64)? An absolute narcissist.

This is exactly where Gay’s fourth reason for the difficulty of ‘Beyond the Pleasure Principle’ leads: not to the insurmountable rock of castration, but to the impenetrable wall of narcissism. ‘Beyond the Pleasure Principle’ is difficult, because it surreptitiously invokes the demonic spectre of narcissism, at three distinct levels: (1) Freud’s own manifest narcissism as the sole inventor of psychoanalytic theory, (2) the clinical and theoretical impasse of narcissism as the libidinal investment of the ego which undoes the distinction between the ego drives and the sexual drives, and (3) the narcissism of the reader, who may not only be infuriated by Freud’s own, clearly identifiable narcissism, but also by this narcissistic father’s intrepid questioning of the fundamental value of narcissism itself. The middle (or central) level of this threefold confluence of narcissism is by far the most important one, partly because it is at this level that Freud the narcissistic writer meets his narcissistic readership, partly because the sexual quality of narcissism appears to be the main and possibly the only force operating beyond the pleasure principle.

In the dual, temporally deferred footnote Freud attached to the codicil of the sixth section of ‘Beyond the Pleasure Principle’, and which thus in some sense represents Freud’s second and third refusal for ‘breaking off’, he states that his speculations were designed “to solve the riddle of life [*das Rätsel des Lebens*]”, which comes down to the question of the coming into life of inorganic matter (*Belebung des Anorganischen*), whereby this coming into being (*Anfang des Lebens*) has been demonstrated to involve the simultaneous emergence of the death drive and the life drives, the latter being synonymous with the sexual drives (Freud 1920g, pp. 60-61 footnote 1). In other words, Freud’s entire speculative effort is concentrated on the articulation of a biogenetic theory, an explanatory hypothesis for the emergence of life, which forces him to conclude that life is fundamentally impure, in a state of perennial conflict, owing to the concurrent operation of forces driven towards its destruction and forces intent on its continuation.[18] Yet contrary to what he seems to have been insinuating from the start of his text, the pleasure principle is not contradicted by the forces driven towards extinction. As Freud concedes, not without a requisite but possibly disingenuous degree of hesitation, in the final section of his essay: “The pleasure principle seems actually to serve the death drives [*Das Lustprinzip scheint geradezu im Dienste der Todestriebe zu stehen*]” (Freud 1920g, p. 63). Paradoxical as this statement may sound, it is a perfectly logical conclusion. If the pleasure principle serves the purpose of reducing tension to the lowest possible level and thus potentially to nothingness, and the death drive tends to annihilate the intrinsic tension of life, then both must be working according to the same rules. This is indeed the startling, and generally ignored or misrecognized outcome of Freud’s biogenetic speculations: what lies beyond the pleasure principle is not the death drive, but the life drive, the sex drive and its narcissistic avatars, because it is these forces that stand in the service of the preservation and prolongation of life and, by implication, of the continuation of tension. Contrary to appearances, it is not the death drive which is giving Freud a headache, but the life *cum* sexual drives and their narcissistic manifestations within the ego. It is not the death drive that should be conceived as the source of life’s miseries, but sex and especially narcissism. This is the true traumatic message of ‘Beyond the Pleasure Principle’: rather than being discombobulated by the death drive as a fundamental source of protracted

unpleasure, it is life itself, human sexuality and in particular the narcissistic investment of the ego that should trouble us, because the fundamental *modus operandi* of these forces is to increase tension, i.e. to generate and sustain unpleasure. To any reader, this assertion can only come as a narcissistic blow in itself and I would therefore not be surprised if the repetitive identification of 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle' with the death drive, its endlessly repeated reduction to the allegedly spurious invention of a self-destructive force, constitutes an insidious act of displacement, away from the traumatic core, towards something more manageable, more easily dismissible in its speculative assault on reasonable comprehension. And to add insult to injury, Freud really does break off at the point of his startling conclusion, trying to soothe the reader with the confession: "This in turn raises a host of other questions to which we can at present find no answer. We must be patient and await fresh methods and occasions for research [*weitere Mittel und Anlässe zur Forschung*]" (Freud 1920g, pp. 63-64).

How long are we prepared to wait? Which fresh methods could we hope for? What type of occasions for research would allow us to take these questions forward? To the best of my knowledge, after Freud broke off 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle', quite some time after the moment for breaking off had already come, he did not return to it, did not bend his subsequent reflections back towards these original questions. However, at the risk of trying to solve one riddle with a new, even more complicated puzzle, I would venture the claim that Freud did build on his biogenetic theory during the last years of his life, in a book that was even more tentative and repetitive, and even more scandalously speculative than 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle', namely in *Moses and Monotheism* or, in its much more evocative German title, *Der Mann Moses und die monotheistische Religion* (Freud 1939a).[19] Despite its opening gambit, in which Freud infamously suggested that the founding father of Judaism had in fact been an Egyptian, this book is not so much about the Biblical figure of Moses, but about the man Moses, about Mosesman, who is employed here as an allegorical platform for the construction of a higher-level ontogenetic hypothesis, which is crucially concerned with the process of becoming human (*Menschwerdung*). And much like in 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle', Freud argues in his Moses-book that becoming human is not a straightforward developmental process of growth which would result in higher degrees of pleasure and happiness. Instead, becoming human is inherently traumatic, because it coincides with the return of all kinds of inherited and acquired memory-traces that constitute the basis for the emergence of the neuroses. In other words, much like Freud's biogenetic speculations in 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle' prompted the conclusion that life (sex, narcissism) is in and of itself predicated upon the increase and acceleration of tension, his anthropogenetic account in *Moses and Monotheism* portrays 'hominization' as a new source of conflict, which cannot be dissociated from the very existence of the human life form as a social, speaking being. To any reader, this assertion can only come as yet another narcissistic blow and I would therefore not be surprised if the repetitive identification of *Moses and Monotheism* with the supposedly Egyptian origins of Moses, its endlessly repeated reduction to the allegedly spurious invention of a non-Jewish ancestry for the founder of Judaism, represents another insidious act of displacement, away from the traumatic core, towards something more manageable, more easily dismissible in its speculative assault on reasonable comprehension.

Deathbound Narcissism

Of all the manifestations of the sexual drives, narcissism deserves a more detailed consideration here, if only because it permeates 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle' on at least three levels (see above), encapsulates the main reason for Freud's abandonment of the distinction between the ego-drives and the life-drives, and leaves him with many more questions than answers, too many questions for him to be able to answer with his chosen 'method of research'. Singling out the most important issue amongst those Freud himself succeeds in identifying is by no means an easy task. If all drives are conservative, then the sexual drives must be conservative too, yet what would it mean for the sexual drives to tend towards the restoration of an earlier state of things? What is the origin of sexual reproduction? How does sexual reproduction contribute to the prolongation of life? What came before sex? What is the opposite of sex? I shall restrict myself to a problem which is not nearly as meta-psychological as it sounds, because it may very well affect the

continuation of the human life form, or *mutatis mutandis* the predisposing factors for the extinction of the human individual and, by extension, the entire human species. What is the relation between narcissism and the death drive? If narcissism, as a manifestation of the sexual drives, operates beyond the pleasure principle, and the latter, as Freud himself conceded, actually serves the death drive, does this imply that narcissism *de facto* opposes the death drive, acting against it, reducing its force and neutralising its impact? More than anything else, this question immediately prompts further reflection upon the precise meaning of narcissism itself, both within Freud's work and within broader psychoanalytic, psycho-social and sociological reflections upon the human condition. However, for the sake of brevity, I shall concentrate on Freud's own discussion of the topic in his seminal 1914 paper 'Narcissism: An Introduction', which continues to inform many psychoanalytic perspectives on (the clinical manifestations of) narcissism, despite that fact that it was written at a relatively early point in Freud's intellectual itinerary—when the dualisms between the pleasure principle and the reality principle, and between the ego-drives and the sexual drives were still firmly in place—and therefore does not bear the hallmarks of the death drive, the second topography, and other subsequent theoretical innovations, such as the new outlook on anxiety.

Although Freud describes narcissism as a highly complex psychological function, which comes in a primary and a secondary form, and underpins the differentiation of the ego into an ideal ego and an ego ideal, it is essentially a crucial transitional stage in the ontogenetic development of the libido, situated between auto-erotism and object-love. Narcissism is to be understood as the libidinal cathexis (*Besetzung*) of the ego, which is the “complement to the egoism of the self-preservation drive, a measure of which may justifiably be attributed to every living creature” (Freud 1914c, pp. 73-74). Narcissism thus constitutes a manifestation of ego-libido and represents a key stage of infantile libidinal development, which operates in the service of self-preservation. When the libido is subsequently directed towards an external object and the need for self-preservation must be balanced against the equally crucial need for the preservation of the species, narcissism does not completely disappear, but its ‘primary’ (infantile) manifestation is exchanged for a ‘secondary’ investment of the ego, which is in itself the result of the re-introjection of object-libido into the ego. All of this is exceedingly well-known within the psychoanalytic community, so firmly established as a theoretical axiom that it is rarely questioned anymore.

Neither in his 1914 paper nor in any other of his published works does Freud refer to the mythological figure of Narcissus, from whose name the term ‘narcissism’ is derived, yet given Freud's deep familiarity with the literature of classical Antiquity it is quite simply unthinkable that he would not have known it. In fact, the myth is so widely known that he would not even have required any kind of in-depth knowledge of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, which contains the most commonly cited version of it.[20] It is all the more surprising, then, that Freud seems to have been delighted to embrace Narcissus as the mythological epitome of self-infatuation, but totally ignored the unmistakably tragic end of the story. In all the versions of the Narcissus-myth that have survived, Narcissus-the-hunter, the stunningly handsome son of the nymph Liriopi, who is so enamoured of himself that he cannot allow any suitor—male or female, and irrespective of their own beauty—to encroach upon his vanity, dies as a result of falling madly in love with himself. In the third book of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, our young man is devoured by his passion when he discovers that his love-object is but a reflection of himself in the mirroring surface of a pool, and thus never to be fully possessed and never capable of reciprocal admiration (Ovid 2004, pp. 115-116). Knowing that his love-object would always remain faithful to him, yet faced with the incendiary short-circuit of his passion, which makes it impossible for him to be loved back by his love-object, Narcissus self-destructs and from the soil in which his body disintegrates a beautiful golden-white flower springs. In other, pre- or post-Ovidian re-tellings of the myth, Narcissus sometimes drowns in the mirror-pool when he endeavours to merge with his beloved, or his overwhelming grief drives him to plunge a dagger into his own chest (Graves 1960, pp. 287-288). In all of these versions, Narcissus dies young, his excessive vanity having become self-destructive, in a tragic fulfilment of Tiresias's prophecy to Liriopi: Narcissus will live to a ripe old age “so long as he never knows himself” (Ovid 2004, p. 109).

At no given point, neither in his 1914 exposition of the subject matter, nor in any of his subsequent returns to it, does Freud consider the possibility that narcissism, in its primary and/or its secondary form, may already

contain within itself the seeds of self-annihilation. Even when primary narcissism gives way to object-love, he states: “[T]he idea of there being an original libidinal cathexis of the ego, from which some is later given off to objects . . . fundamentally persists” (Freud 1914c, p. 75). And so the conclusion imposes itself that, for all his mythological significance, Narcissus is not a narcissist. Unlike Narcissus, the narcissists as we have come to know and understand them through (Freudian) psychoanalysis and progressively refined psychiatric labels such as the Narcissistic Personality Disorder (301.81) rarely self-destruct, which probably explains why the self-help sections in bookstores are littered with volumes offering people advice on how to deal, overcome and occasionally kill the narcissists (American Psychiatric Association 2013, pp. 669-672; Simon 2016). Were the narcissists to be anything like Narcissus, we would not need to worry about how to get rid of them, because sooner or later they would get rid of themselves.

Why does Freud fail to ascertain the tragic, self-destructive dimension of narcissism? Here we can only have recourse to speculation, often far-fetched speculation, which the reader will consider or dismiss according to his or her individual predilection. . . One possible answer could be that in 1914 Freud had not conceptualised the death drive yet, so that his attention remained exclusively focused on the economical distinctions between object-love (sexuality) and ego-investment (self-preservation). Quite remarkably though, when he revisited his original opposition between the ego-drives and the sexual drives in ‘Beyond the Pleasure Principle’, this did not embolden him to acknowledge the lethal dimension of narcissism either, but merely resulted in an amalgamation of the life-drives and the sexual drives under the aegis of Eros—after all, Freud admitted, narcissistic libido is also “a manifestation of the force of the sexual drive”—which is subsequently placed in opposition to the death drive (Freud 1920g, p. 52).[21] Another possible answer could be that, in his 1914 paper and later on, whenever Freud emphasized the sexualised quality of narcissism, he was not working from the myth of Narcissus in any of its known versions, but rather from how psychiatrists (Paul Näcke), sexologists (Havelock Ellis) and fellow psychoanalysts (Otto Rank, Isidor Sadger) had already employed a certain ‘de-thanatized’ conception of narcissism (Näcke 1899; Ellis 1937[1910]; Rank 1911; Sadger 1913). As I pointed out earlier, by contrast with the Oedipus-complex, Freud definitely did not rehearse the mythological narrative of Narcissus when he set out to examine the function and status of narcissism in the realm of human libidinal development. Finally, an undoubtedly more controversial answer to the question as to why Freud’s theory of narcissism is stripped of its self-destructive elements could be that he was effectively prevented from appreciating this dimension on account of his own narcissism, which suffuses the 1914 paper both in Freud’s polemical disagreements with Jung and Adler and in his generally sympathetic descriptions of self-regard and the ego ideal as secondary manifestations of narcissism. As we saw earlier, ‘Beyond the Pleasure Principle’ is equally driven by the author’s own narcissism, most explicitly in his categorical refusal to engage with any alternative viewpoints, despite his acknowledgement that his own speculations may have little or no substance.

Purely on the basis of Freud’s own constructions and speculations one may easily argue that narcissism must operate in opposition to the death drive, i.e. that the death drive’s tendency to return to an earlier state is counteracted by the libidinal investment of the ego which, as Freud himself repeats, consistently operates in the service of the maintenance and prolongation of life. However, throughout Freud’s own, admittedly abstruse investigations of how the sexual drives could possibly obey the purportedly universal principle of inertia—the assumption that all drives are conservative (regressive) and therefore tending towards the restoration of an earlier state—there is already a fly in the ointment. For even though Freud remains rather reluctant to speculate about what the exact purpose of the sexual drives may be, he sporadically plays with the idea that it might be something like “potential immortality [*potentielle Unsterblichkeit*]” or an “appearance of immortality [*Schein der Unsterblichkeit*]” (Freud 1920g, pp. 40 & 46).[22] The logic is again indisputable: if life equals tension and therefore tends to its opposite, notably what has disappeared with its emergence, and which can only be termed death, then sexuality must also tend towards its opposite, which would have to be immortality, because only when species reproduce in a non-sexual way is there a possibility for the organism to carry on living, potentially forever. Freud realizes all too well, however, that this logic is difficult to sustain in the case of complex, multi-cellular organisms, for which the confluence of egg-cells and sperm-cells is the only available method of reproduction.[23] It is difficult to sustain, because

for these life forms immortality is not a true option at all for undoing the impact of the sexual drives, at least not in the sense that death is a genuinely available and attainable option for the resolution of life. This is no doubt why Freud only refers to ‘potential’ or ‘the appearance of’ immortality, whilst positing that the latter “may mean no more than a lengthening of the road to death” (Freud 1920g, p. 40).

Yet there may be another way of looking at the problematic issue of immortality in higher-level, multi-cellular, sexually reproducing organisms, especially in those life forms that are generally referred to as human beings. Freud does not address this alternative in ‘Beyond the Pleasure Principle’, because he is primarily concerned with biogenesis, and it would not start to appear on his radar until *Moses and Monotheism*, where the focus shifts towards anthropogenesis. Because human beings speak and are embedded in a structure of language, the ineluctably excluded option of biological immortality can be replaced with the option of symbolic immortality, whereby the organism succeeds in transcending its own inevitable biological death by securing eternal life in the ineradicable traces that it leaves behind in the socio-cultural repository called ‘collective memory’. Narcissism, as a redirection of the sexual drives towards the ego, could thus recuperate the biological immortality it has been forced to abandon by virtue of its origins in the cycle of sexual reproduction, at a higher, supra-biological level of functioning. Here, in the realms of language, memory and the symbolic order, immortality is no longer doomed to remain a potentiality, but can become real, insofar as the mnemonic traces that the living organism has left behind in the collective memory guarantee its eternal life. The only problem is that this higher, symbolic immortality is itself predicated upon the biological death of the living organism, so that the latter will never be in a position to know whether it has attained the immortality it may have been aiming for.[24] It is only by virtue of his narcissistic suicide that Narcissus becomes immortalised in the flower bearing his name, when he is no longer *Da* to appreciate and enjoy it.[25]

The upshot is that narcissism (and the sexual drives conditioning its coming into being) does not work in opposition to the death drive, because in its (conscious or unconscious) attempts at attaining immortality it effectively re-connects with the purpose of the death drive. Much like narcissism represents the point where the ego-drives and the sexual drives coalesce, it is also an index of the point of contact between the death drive and the life drives. I am even tempted to propose that the stronger the narcissistic tendencies that are at work in the human life form the more its own death is likely to become a reality. We do not require the hypothetical construct of a ‘negative narcissism’, as an ‘ego-dystonic’ or ‘ego destructive’ force, then—as it was once suggested by André Green (2001, pp. 17-16)—to conclude that narcissism is also deathbound. Put differently, the lethal force of narcissism does not reside in its reversal—from a positive, life-affirming quality to a negative, life-denying tendency—but rather in its pure, unadulterated expression as a drive towards symbolic immortality. Much like in the myth of Narcissus, lethal narcissism is not predicated upon narcissism losing some of its self-oriented libidinal cathexes, but on exactly the opposite: the libidinal cathexes of the ego becomes so excessive that the anticipated prolongation of life shifts into its opposite and results in a sudden or gradual death. This may be by far the greatest paradox of all: the more human beings are narcissistically invested in the maintenance and extension of their own individual lives, the more they are at risk of unwittingly expediting their own demise. Beyond the boundaries of psychoanalytic speculation, my argument that the more a living organism is narcissistically invested in protecting its own existence, the more it is at risk of unwittingly facilitating and expediting its annihilation may also be substantiated in other ways. As an ‘auto-sexual’ investment, narcissism does not contribute to solid community building, but only to the glorification of the individual, which in the long run would not only lead to the (inevitable) death of the individual, but also to the gradual positioning of communal life at the edge of extinction, and thus to the potential extinction of life as such. Narcissism is by definition adverse to creative cross-fertilisation and to the progressive revitalisation of the species that emanates from ‘allo-sexual’ investments, because the latter are fundamentally predicated upon the reduction of its ‘auto-sexual’ counterparts. Perhaps the current global pandemic may offer the best example of all, because its allegedly zoonotic origin is the indirect outcome of the persistent, anthropocentric destruction of natural habitats, driven by a deeply narcissistic human tendency to capture, control, cultivate and exploit ‘otherness’ for the pure sake of self-empowerment.[26]

Conclusion

When 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle' first appeared, in the late Autumn of 1920, the radical disintegration of the old Imperial forces that once ruled over Central Europe had thrown at least that part of the world in a state of total disarray, leaving its people desperately looking for new psycho-social moorings. Yet despite the widespread political uncertainties, the rampant unemployment, the hyperinflation, the outdoor threats of violent crime and the indoor struggles of daily life, this ubiquitous aura of death and disaster somehow managed to fuel the imagination and unleash the powers of the creative mind—in a portentous alliance of what Joseph Schumpeter would much later designate, within an altogether different framework, as a process of 'creative destruction' (Schumpeter 1976[1942], pp. 81-86). Shortly after the Great War, the trailblazing German architect and *Bauhaus*-director Walter Gropius described the cultural climate in words that would resonate with an entire generation of artistic adventurers in search of a new horizon: "Today's artist lives in an era of dissolution, without guidance. He stands alone. The old forms are in ruins, the benumbed world is shaken up, the old human spirit is invalidated and in flux toward a new form. We float in space and cannot yet perceive the new order" (Arbeitsrat für Kunst 1919, p. 52). But floating in space did not result in placid resignation; the unbound flux did not tend towards the restoration of an earlier state of things, as Freud would have seen it (Freud 1920g, p. 38). In various corners of the broken European continent, the artistic vanguard decided to make the break with the past even deeper, deconstructing former arrangements even more forcefully, so that all creative energies could be channeled towards the emergence of something that had never been seen or heard before. The socio-cultural climate in which Freud gave birth to 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle' was rife with destruction, yet destructiveness was actively pursued as the necessary precondition for radical change. To claim, as Freud did, that "the elementary living entity", and by extension all life forms, would "have had no wish to change", that there is no such thing as a force "tending towards change and progress" would have been consistently disproven by the pervasive atmosphere of intense renewal (Freud 1920g, p. 38). And so it should not come as a surprise that Freud's painfully pessimistic message fell on deaf ears.

Might the current constellation of the human life-world, which is commonly regarded as 'unprecedented', 'the worst peacetime emergency in living memory', a 'global human and economic catastrophe', be significantly better suited to appreciate the sinister relevance of Freud's daring speculations than the historical circumstances under which they originally took shape? I doubt it. Economically, the seemingly unstoppable rise of global capitalism is built upon the very same accumulative, self-serving strategies of personal enrichment as the narcissistic mechanisms in the spheres of self-identity and self-preservation. Narcissism rules like never before, so much so that autocrats in various parts of the world have cleverly taken advantage of the human-made pandemic to try and boost their own image and galvanise (increase and prolong) their positions of power. But many 'average citizens' too, even in those countries with the highest COVID-related deaths, routinely reject anything that might be seen or felt as an encroachment upon their perceived civil liberties, the more so as they have been lured into a false sense of freedom by the neo-liberal values of self-governance and limitless enterprise.

"I pay my taxes", I overheard someone say, "I want to do whatever I want and not be told by anyone what to do, like wearing a stupid mask on public transport." "I want to be in control of my own life", I heard someone else claim, "and so I shall go out whenever I want, see whoever I want to see, and do all the things I want to, without any kind of restriction." There is always a possibility that narcissism, whether under the guise of self-control or as political nationalism, increases as an individual or collective response to sudden instances of death and destruction, as was clearly the case in the aftermath of 9/11. This would be the exclusively life-driven, Apollonian side of narcissism, which desperately restores and extends (human) life in the wake of death. The Dionysiac side, which would suggest that an excess of narcissism is itself to a large extent responsible for the acceleration of extinction, is undoubtedly a much more uncomfortable dimension to acknowledge and accept. And there is no reason to think that, just because the contemporary state of the human life-world is simultaneously radically inert and fundamentally death-driven, it might be easier for us to recognise it.

As it happens, it is not just the (exceedingly) lethal aspect of (excessive) narcissism that still seems hard to swallow. Freud's death drive too still appears to be rather contentious. On 3 April 2020, my friend and colleague Josh Cohen published a piece celebrating the centenary of 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle' in the weekly 'Times Literary Supplement'. In his exceptionally thoughtful essay, Cohen wondered aloud whether there might be "a title more worthy of inclusion, or more unbearable to read right now [in the age of lockdown]", yet he also went on to develop an extremely cogent argument that the destructive version of the death drive, in which its "annihilating logic" is turned outwards, facilitating the dissolution and downfall of external objects, has always been much more agreeable (plausible and respectable) than its conservative (inertial) version, in which the obliterating force is turned inwards, towards the extinction of life itself (Cohen 2020, p. 9).[27] Cohen argued that this 'other side' of the death drive "has found more resonance among artists than clinicians", citing works by Samuel Beckett and Georges Perec in support of his thesis. Yet returning to the current state of the world, he ended by highlighting how the socio-political imperative to protect life was ironically putting a spoke in the seemingly unstoppable wheels of the life drive, suspending the civilizational goals of expansion and progress. Cohen called it "the death drive's mirthless last laugh", but the editors did not like it and so he was forced to change it to something more palatable, namely that artists tend to travel to "a region beyond life in order to see it anew" (Cohen 2020, personal communication). Even the editors of high-brow literary magazines still insist on a message of hope, even if it is situated within the confines of modernist art. I shall leave it to others to speculate whether this too is yet another instance of narcissism.

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Notes:

[1] For a summary of the early criticisms, see Fenichel (1954[1935]). In his 1937 essay ‘Analysis Terminable and Interminable’, Freud disclosed: “I am well aware that the dualistic theory according to which a drive towards death or destruction or aggression claims equal rights as a partner with Eros as manifested in the libido, has found little sympathy and has not really been accepted even among psychoanalysts” (1937c, p. 244). Here and throughout my text, I have modified Strachey’s translation of Freud’s word ‘*Trieb*’ as ‘instinct’ into the now commonly accepted term ‘drive’. Freud’s proposition was not only considered morally objectionable because its implication that all human beings are animated by a tendency to self-destruct stood in flagrant violation of Talmudic law, but also because it seemed to dismiss the seriousness of suicidal ideation as a clinical quandary requiring life-saving psychoanalytic interventions. The latter issue was by no means a hypothetical situation within Freud’s circle, because on 3 July 1919, shortly after Freud would have completed a first draft of ‘Beyond the Pleasure Principle’, the brilliant young psychoanalyst Victor Tausk took his own life, notably after Freud himself had insisted upon Helene Deutsch that he would only be able to continue her analysis with him on condition that she terminate her analytic treatment of Tausk. See, in this context, the polemic between Roazen (1970, 1990) and Eissler (1971, 1982) concerning Freud’s responsibility for Tausk’s suicide. For the first draft of ‘Beyond the Pleasure Principle’, which Freud completed between mid-April and mid-March 1919, and which did not contain the crucial sixth section of the text, see Freud (2015[1919]) and May (2015).

[2] The psychoanalytic literature on the clinical relevance of the death drive is vast and generally falls into one of three categories: practitioners who reject the notion as serving no clinical purpose at all, such as Fenichel (1946) and Thompson (1952), clinicians who emphasize its fundamental clinical import, such as Lacan (1988[1978]) and Hinshelwood (1994), and those who embrace the (self-)destructive and (self-)aggressive manifestations of the death drive but not the (inborn) drive towards the complete annihilation of life. For two excellent examples of the latter recuperation of Freud’s principle, see Kernberg (2011) and Feldman (2011).

[3] One of the central arguments of Derrida’s sprawling, digressive essay ‘To Speculate—On “Freud”’, which contains one of the most fascinating reflections upon the disquieting style of Freud’s text, is that Freud’s writing compulsively enacts its own substance, in a constant to-ing and fro-ing and a persistent imitation of the sense-organs *cum* feelers which, as Freud himself put it, “are all the time making tentative advances . . . and then drawing back” (Freud 1920g, p. 28). As Derrida indicated in the first footnote to his text and at the start of its second chapter, its contents had been extracted from a 1975-’76 seminar entitled *Life death*, yet when comparing the published text of the essay to the text of the seminar, it becomes immediately clear that Derrida did not just copy his seminar notes, but hugely amplified certain parts whilst adding various others, going so far as to reactivate investigations from a subsequently abandoned text entitled *Le calcul des langues* (*The Calculus of Tongues*), which in itself anticipated the 1974 bombshell that was *Glas*. See Derrida (2020a, 2020b, 1986[1974]). For an instructive critical comparison of Derrida’s

reading of ‘Beyond the Pleasure Principle’ in *Life death* with his deconstruction of it in ‘To Speculate—On “Freud”’, see McCance (2019, pp. 125-146).

[4] For an excellent meditation on planetary biodiversity at the edge of extinction, see Van Dooren (2014). I am grateful to Ben Ware for drawing my attention to this work.

[5] In each of the two instances when Freud uses the term, Strachey has translated *Menschwerdung* as hominization, although in the first case with an explanatory footnote, in which he stated that *Menschwerdung* literally means ‘the process of becoming human’.

[6] In the third volume of his biography of Freud, Ernest Jones claimed that the essay was published “at the beginning of December, 1920” (Jones 1957, p. 40), yet this is an inference made on the basis of a letter Freud wrote to Karl Abraham on 28 November that year, in which he stated: “You [Abraham] will receive the ‘Beyond’ in a few days” (Falzeder 2002, p. 434). In all likelihood, the book had just come off the press when Freud wrote to Abraham, because on that very same day he wrote to Georg Groddeck: “Maybe my latest short text ‘Beyond the Pleasure Principle’, which has just been published, will change my views on character also somewhat in your eyes too” (Giefer & Schuh 2008, p. 134). On Freud’s text being difficult, see for example Gay (1988, p. 398) and Dufresne (2011, p. 13). Unless otherwise indicated, all translations from foreign language sources are my own.

[7] *The Parallax View* only offers a small glimpse of Žižek’s reinterpretation of the Freudian death drive. For an excellent comprehensive critical analysis of Žižek’s views on the death drive and their roots in his theoretical integration of Lacanian psychoanalytic theory and German idealism, see Hook (2016).

[8] In the German original, the first three quotations are printed in *Sperrdruck*, and they have been rendered in italics in the *Standard Edition*, yet for the second and the third quotation single inverted commas have been added in the *Standard Edition*, undoubtedly because these lines appear immediately after a colon there. This falsely suggests, however, that Freud himself adopted these sentences as quotations from another source, as he knowingly did with the expression ‘perpetual recurrence of the same thing’ (“*ewige Wiederkehr des Gleichen*”), although without mentioning the name of its author Friedrich Nietzsche (Freud 1920g, p. 22).

[9] With regard to the question of intellectual uncertainty, it is worth recalling here that Freud completed a first draft of ‘Beyond the Pleasure Principle’ during the Spring of 1919, when he was also working on ‘The “Uncanny”’, in which the issue of intellectual uncertainty occupies a central, if somewhat ambiguous place. It had been used as an explanatory hypothesis for all instances of the uncanny by Ernst Jentsch, Freud’s predecessor in all things uncanny, and was resolutely rejected by Freud in favour of the principle of castration anxiety, yet not without certain misgivings about his own reasons for doing so. See, in this respect, Freud (1919h, pp. 226-233), Jentsch (1997[1906]), Royle (2003), Masschelein (2011) and Nobus (1993).

[10] Throughout his essay ‘To Speculate—“On Freud”’, Derrida plays extensively on the homophony between the abbreviated French terms for ‘pleasure principle’ (*principe de plaisir*, PP) and ‘reality principle’ (*principe de réalité*, PR) on the one hand, and the French words for grandfather (*pépé*) and father (*père*) on the other hand, which leads to a series of highly charged, often humorous statements that inevitably become lost in translation. See Derrida (1987[1980]).

[11] The verse as it appears in the published version of Freud’s letter to Eitingon contains two errors, because the original reads “*Si fractus illabatur orbis, impavidum ferient ruinae*”. The inversion of the first two words in Freud’s reproduction of the phrase does not alter its meaning, yet the modification of the last word into ‘*minae*’ does not make sense. The original manuscript of the letter, which has been deposited in the Sigmund Freud Papers at the Library of Congress, shows that Freud definitely wrote ‘*ruinae*’ instead of ‘*minae*’, so the mistake is to be attributed to a transcription error rather than a failure of Freud’s memory, or his poor command of Latin.

[12] For all I have been able to ascertain, Sterba’s recollection is the only record of this meeting of the Vienna Psychoanalytic Society that has survived.

[13] In the verse as it appears in Sterba’s book the third word is misspelled as ‘*inlabatur*’,

which is also reproduced in the German and the French versions of the book. Again, this is either a printer’s error or Sterba’s own mistake, because Freud’s letter to Eitingon of 27 May 1920 demonstrates that he knew the verse very well.

[14] In the original, English edition of Sterba’s book, the translation only appears in English, which is evidently a re-translation of Freud’s own translation, which appears in German both in the German edition of Sterba’s reminiscences and as a footnote to the aforementioned letter to Eitingon in the German edition of the complete Freud-Eitingon correspondence (Schröter 2004, p. 207 footnote 10).

[15] In Niall Rudd’s translation, the verse reads: “If the firmament were to split and crash down upon him, he will still be unafraid when hit by the wreckage” (Horace 2004, p. 147).

[16] In the second edition of ‘Civilization and Its Discontents’, Freud added a footnote to the penultimate paragraph of the second section, in which he wrote: “I feel impelled to point out at least one of the gaps that have been left in the account [of the conditions of happiness] given above. No discussion of the possibilities of human happiness should omit to take into consideration the relation between narcissism and object libido. We require to know what being essentially self-dependent signifies for the economics of the libido” (Freud 1930a, p. 84 footnote 2).

[17] In a brilliant gloss on the strange opening sentence of ‘Beyond the Pleasure Principle’, Derrida writes: “When Freud advances a statement implying that psychoanalytic theory exists, he in no way is in the situation of a theoretician in the field of another science, nor is he any more in the position of an epistemologist or of a historian of the sciences. He is attesting to an act whose contract implies that the act come back [*revienne*] to him, and that he answer for it. In a certain way he seems to have contracted only with himself. *He would have written himself*. To himself, as if someone were sending himself a message informing himself by certified letter, on an official document, of the attested existence of a theoretical history to which he himself—such is the content of the message—gave the send-off [*coup d’envoi*]” (Derrida 1987[1980], p. 274).

[18] For an excellent historical survey of the conflicting theories about the origin of life that have been adduced since the mid-nineteenth century, see Marshall (2020).

[19] The literal translation of the full original German title would be: *The Man Moses and Monotheistic Religion: Three Essays*.

[20] On 6 August 1873, when Freud was seventeen years old, he wrote a letter to his friend Eduard Silberstein, in which he alluded to a phrase from Ovid’s *Epistulae ex Ponto* (*Letters from the Black Sea*) without feeling the need to mention author or work (Boehlich 1990, p. 34). On 23 July 1914, Freud’s eldest son Martin knew he could freely quote a line from Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* in a letter to his father, without having to include a translation, or mention the author’s name and the source (Schröter 2011, p. 128).

[21] Oliver Harris has correctly suggested that Freud could have easily appended the Narcissus myth to his rehearsal of Aristophanes’ myth of the origin of love in Plato’s *Symposium*, towards the end of the sixth section of ‘Beyond the Pleasure Principle’ (Harris 2017, p. 66).

[22] In claiming that the real purpose of the Freudian death drive is not death but immortality, Žižek thus re-sexualizes the death drive, transferring the goal Freud reserves exclusively for the sexual drives back onto the death drive.

[23] It goes without saying that Freud’s perspective on this matter may have been different had he been aware of the possibility for complex multi-cellular organisms to be cloned, yet even in this case it remains to be seen whether cloned organisms can have the same average life-span as organisms resulting from sexual reproduction.

[24] Fernando Castrillón pointed out to me that, on occasion, a living person could achieve some measure of immortality through the production of writings (*verba volent, scripta manent!*), the naming of buildings, or the erection of monuments, yet I would argue that these various ‘symbols of immortality’ only sustain the *fantasy* of immortality in whomever is represented by them and do not indicate symbolic immortality in its absolute form.

[25] This is indeed how I would interpret the metamorphosis of the dead Narcissus into “a flower with a trumpet of gold and pale white petals” in Ovid’s narrative: the memory of the young man who must die, because he has not been able to avoid knowing himself, is preserved in the symbolic representation of the flower. See Ovid (2004, p. 116).

[26] I am grateful to Ben Ware for articulating these connections and for sharing his thoughts on the relation between extinction, ecology and global capitalism with me.

[27] It is perhaps also worth noting here that in the magazine’s weekly announcement of 27 March 2020 of the highlights of the forthcoming issue, Josh Cohen was listed as reflecting upon the centenary of Freud’s *Civilization and Its Discontents*, which was originally published in book-form in 1930. Hence, the editor of the ‘Times Literary Supplement’ somehow wanted to celebrate the centenary of *Civilization and Its Discontents*, in which Freud addressed the conflict between the restrictions of civilization and the insistent demands of the drives head-on, ten years early, or perhaps felt that it would have been better to celebrate this particular essay than the birthday of ‘Beyond the Pleasure Principle’. I did not hesitate to highlight the error, alongside some additional reflections, in a short Letter to the Editor, yet it was never published.

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