Beyond the Pleasure Principle
(1920)

Note: The following writings
--in single quotation marks are from http://www.nyfreudian.org/abstracts/abs_volumes/vol-18.htm
--in double quotation marks from the original text. See the full citations at the Sources at the end.

I. Definition of Terms:

1) Economic perspective: pleasure = reduction of tension/principle of constancy, but "the relationship between subjective sensations of pleasure-unpleasure and the economic processes that are said to underline them appeared to Freud . . . to be a highly complicated one.” (Laplanche 342)

- Pleasure principle – “One of the two principles which, according to Freud, govern mental functioning: the whole psychic activity is aimed at avoiding unpleasure and procuring pleasure. Inasmuch as unpleasure is related to the increase of quantities of excitation, and pleasure their reduction, the principle in question may be said to be an economic one. . . [This idea <pleasure = reduction of excitation> is soon abandoned by Freud]. In Beyond the Pleasure Principle, he remarks that unpleasure and the feeling of tension should not be treated as identical: pleasurable tensions, in other words, do exist.” (Laplanche 322-23)

- The principle of Constancy – “Principle according to which the psychical apparatus tends to keep the quantity of excitation in itself at as low a level—or, at any rate, as constant a level—as possible. Constancy is achieved on the one
hand through the discharge of the energy already present, and, on the other, by avoidance of whatever might increase the quantity of excitation and defense against any such increase that does occur.” (Laplanche 341) (See excerpt 596-

**Death Instinct** – the instinct to “bring living back to the inorganic state. The death instincts are to begin with directed inwards and tend toward self-destruction, but they are subsequently turned towards the outside world in the form of the aggressive or destructive instinct.” (Laplanche 97)

**Cathexis** – “Economic concept: the fact that a certain amount of psychical energy is attached to the idea or to a group of ideas, to a part of the body, to an object, etc.” (See excerpt definition of trauma p. 607; 608)

**Free/Bound Energy** (or mobile energy and quiescent energy) -- “In the primary process, the energy is said to be free or mobile in as much as it flows towards discharge in the speediest and most direct fashion possible; in the secondary process, on the other hand, it is bound in that its movement towards discharge is checked and controlled. Generally speaking, the free state of energy is seen by Freud as prior to the bound one, and the latter is said to be characteristic of a more advanced stage in the structuring of the psychical apparatus.” (Laplanche 171) (See excerpt 610-11)

### II. Discussion Questions

1. How does Freud complicate the issue of the pleasure principle of the regulating principle of our psychic apparatus? For you personally, does pleasure mean ‘reduction of excitation’ or keeping it constant? Do you find Freud ‘post-structuralist’ in arguing that pleasure cannot be related to unpleasure on the one hand, and the constancy principle on the other in a fixed way?

2. Death instinct and repetition compulsion:
   -- Which of Freud’s examples in his article do you agree with (e.g. those driven by fate or possessed by daemonic forces? Tancred. 604-605) What are your examples for or against it?
   -- How is repetition compulsion different from, or similar to, children’s love of repetition in play and story-telling (600-601; 605), and the patient’s transference (602-603)?
   -- Do you agree with Freud that the quest for perfection is only a result of repressing our more primitive instinct to repeat? (Or, as Brown puts it, “in man, the neurotic animal, the instinctual compulsion to repeat turns into its opposite, the quest for novelty, and the unconscious aim of the quest for novelty is repetition” 91)
   (*How is the compulsion to repeat similar to, or different from the post-structuralist concept of différance?)
3. Do you agree that the ultimate defense of our protective shield against trauma resides in 1) preparedness for anxiety, 2) hypercathexis. How does repeated dream about traumatic scenes function here? (trauma definition 608-609)

Editor's note. (1955). ‘. . . [Freud] had already drawn attention to the compulsion to repeat as a clinical phenomenon, but here he attributes to it the characteristics of an instinct; here too for the first time he brings forward the new dichotomy between Eros and the death instincts. The problem of destructiveness, which played an ever more prominent part in his theoretical works, makes its first explicit appearance [in this book].’

Summary (with quotations)

Part I. Review of the pleasure principle.

[Abstract] ‘In the theory of psychoanalysis it is assumed that mental events are automatically regulated by the pleasure principle. The course of those events is invariably set in motion by an unpleasurable tension. The final outcome coincides with a lowering of that tension. The mental apparatus endeavors to keep the quantity of excitation present in it as low as possible. Under the influence of the ego's instincts of self-preservation, the pleasure principle is replaced by the reality principle. Another occasion of the release of unpleasure is to be found in the conflicts and dissensions that take place in the mental apparatus while the ego is passing through its development into more highly composite organizations. Most of the unpleasure that we experience is perceptual unpleasure.’

1) Pleasure is the most “obscure and inaccessible region of the mind. . . [so] the least rigid hypothesis will be the best.” (p. 576) The hypothesis that the pleasure principle follows from the principle of constancy can be challenged.

2) The pleasure principle is not dominant in our life because of
   a. Reality principle -- It is replaced by the reality principle under the influence of the ego’s instincts of self-preservation;
   b. Unsatisfied instincts -- It can be inhibited by incompatible instincts which are “split off from [the unity of the ego] by the process of repression” but then, when struggling through, felt by the ego as ‘unpleasure.’ (597)
   c. External threats of danger
Part II. Traumatic neurosis and children's play are repetitions, which are beyond the regulation by the pleasure principle.

[Abstract] ‘The study of dreams may be considered the most trustworthy method of investigating deep mental processes. Dreams occurring in traumatic neuroses have the characteristic of repeatedly bringing the patient back into the situation of his accident, a situation from which he wakes up in another fright. A game that a 1-year-old child invented was related to the child's great cultural achievement; the instinctual renunciation which he made in allowing his mother to go away without protesting. At the outset, he was in a passive situation; but, by repeating it, unpleasurable though it was, as a game, he took on an active part. There is no need to assume the existence of a special imitative instinct in order to provide a motive for play. It is concluded that even under the dominance of the pleasure principle, there are ways and means enough of making what is in itself unpleasurable into a subject to be recollected and worked over in the mind.’

A. traumatic neurosis:

1) two characteristics – 1) caused by surprise and fright; 2) a wound or injury inflicted simultaneously works as a rule against the development of a neurosis.
2) patients of traumatic neurosis suffer from repeated nightmare—dreams which bring them back to the experience which started their illness.

B. children's play – the fort-da game p. 599— explanation:

1) instinctual renunciation (renunciation of instinctual satisfaction); pleasure gained in staging the mother’s joyful return. But why is the first part of the game—the mother’s departure—staged more frequently?
2) an instinct for mastery or an act of defiance (“I’m sending you away myself.”)
3) pleasure of another sort – the wish to be grown-up or to revenge himself on a substitute (e.g. playmate).
4) artistic play

* “They are of no use for our purposes, since they presuppose the existence and dominance of the pleasure principle; they give no evidence of the operation of tendencies beyond the pleasure principle, that is, the tendency more primitive than it and independent of it.” (601)

Part III. Transference neurosis is a repetition.

[Abstract] ‘Psychoanalysis is first and foremost an art of interpreting. A further aim comes in view: to oblige the patient to confirm the analyst's construction from his own memory. The chief emphasis lies upon the patient's resistances: the art consists in uncovering these as quickly as possible, in pointing them out to the patient, and in
inducing him to abandon his resistances. However, the patient cannot remember the whole of what is repressed in him, and what he cannot remember may be precisely the essential part of it. He is obliged to repeat the repressed material instead of remembering it as something belonging to the past. **These reproductions always concern some portion of infantile sexual life.** When things have reached this stage, it is said that the earlier neurosis has been replaced by a transference neurosis. The physician must get the patient to reexperience some portion of his forgotten life but he must see to it that the patient retains some degree of aloofness. The resistance of the conscious and unconscious ego operates under the sway of the pleasure principle: it seeks to avoid the unpleasure which would be produced by the liberation of the repressed. The early efflorescence of infantile sexual life is doomed to extinction because its wishes are incompatible with reality and with the inadequate stage of development which the child has reached. Patients repeat all of the unwanted situations and painful emotions in the transference and revive them with the greatest ingenuity. What psychoanalysis reveals in the transference phenomena of neurotics can also be observed in the lives of some normal people: those whose human relationships have the same outcome.  

1) **“compulsion to repeat”** – The unconscious offers no resistance to the efforts of the treatment; it is the ego that resists it. There is thus a conflict not between the conscious and the unconscious, but between “the coherent ego and the repressed” (603). -- “compulsion to repeat” brings unpleasure for one system but “satisfaction for the other” (603)  

2) e.g. a. **transference neurosis**: In psychoanalysis, the patient is asked to ‘reproduce’ or repeat the past events, instead of “remembering it as something belonging to the past” (602). Transference (or transference neurosis) can happen, which the physician keeps “within the narrowest limits: to force as much as possible into the channel to the channel of memory and to allow as little as possible to emerge as repetition.”  

-- Children inevitably experience repression or rejection as they grow up; if they get fixated and neurotic, the scenes of rejection will be reproduced when they received treatments. (604)  

3) e.g. b. **other examples** (pp. 604-605)–  

1) being pursued by a malignant fate or 2) possessed by some ‘daemonic’ power.”  

Freud’s interpretation --  

-- “. . . in rare instances can we observe the pure effects of the compulsion to repeat, unsupported by other motives.”  

--“A great deal of what might be described as the compulsion of destiny seems
intelligible on a rational basis; so that we are under no necessity to call in a new and mysterious motive force to explain it.” (605)

4) e.g. e. traumatic dreams – the least dubious instance. (605)

Part IV. Speculations on the death instinct.

[Abstract] ‘Psychoanalytic speculation takes as its point of departure the impression that consciousness may be not the most universal attribute of mental processes, but only a particular function of them. What consciousness yields consists essentially of perceptions of excitations coming from the external world and of feelings of pleasure and unpleasure which arise from within the mental apparatus. The conscious system is characterized by the peculiarity that in it, excitatory processes do not leave behind any permanent change in its elements but expire in the phenomenon of becoming conscious. The living vesicle (水泡) is provided with a shield against stimuli from the external world. The cortical (外皮的) layer next to that shield must be differentiated as an organ for receiving stimuli from without. This sensitivity cortex which later becomes the conscious system, also receives excitations from within. The unpleasure of physical pain is probably the result of the protective shield having been broken through. There is then a continuous stream of excitations from the part of the periphery concerned to the central apparatus of the mind, such as could normally arise only from within the apparatus. Cathetic energy is summoned from all sides to provide sufficiently high cathexes of energy in the environs of the breach. An anticathexis on a grand scale is set up and the other psychical systems are impoverished so that the remaining psychical functions are extensively paralyzed or reduced. The common traumatic neurosis is regarded as a consequence of an extensive breach being made in the protective shield against stimuli. Preparedness for anxiety and the hypercathexis of the receptive systems constitute the last line of defense of the shield against stimuli. Dreams endeavor to master the stimulus retrospectively, by developing the anxiety whose omission was the cause of the traumatic neurosis. An exception to the proposition that dreams are wish fulfillments is dreams occurring in traumatic neuroses; these arise in obedience to the compulsion to repeat. Thus it would seem that the function of dreams, which consists in setting aside any motives that might interrupt sleep, by fulfilling the wishes of disturbing impulses, is not their original function. If there is a 'beyond the pleasure principle,' then there was also a time before the purpose of dreams was the fulfillment of wishes.’

1) perceptual consciousness – on the borderline between outside and inside.

2) perceptual consciousness (or becoming conscious) vs. memory-traces: Every time
we bring memory to our conscious level, it is changed.
3) **trauma:** “any excitations from outside which are powerful enough to break through the protective shield” “a breach in an otherwise efficacious barrier against stimuli” (607).

4) consequences:
   a) provoke a large-scale **disturbance** and set in motion every possible **defensive measure**;
   b) pleasure principle put out of action;
   c) **focusing energies on the breach:** “high cathetic energy is summoned from all sides to provide sufficiently **high cathexes of energy in the environs of the breach**” (607); d) the remaining psychic functions paralyzed or reduced.

5) two kinds of cathexis: a. a freely flowing cathexis that presses on towards discharge and a quiescent cathexis. (608-609)

6) the defense of the shield against stimuli:
   a) preparedness for anxiety and
   b) hypercathectic.
   c) traumatic dreams – “endeavoring to master the stimulus retrospectively, by developing the anxiety whose omission was the cause of the traumatic neurosis” (609)

7) “war neurosis” – “A gross physical injury caused simultaneously by the trauma diminishes the chances that a neurosis will develop.” (610) --since the physical injury “would bind the excess of excitation.”

**Part V. Revision of the theory of instincts.**

[Abstract] ‘The fact that the cortical layer which receives stimuli is without any protective shield against excitations from within must have a~ its result that these latter transmissions of stimulus have a preponderance in economic importance and often occasion economic disturbances comparable with traumatic neuroses. The impulses arising from the instincts do not belong to the type of bound nervous processes but of freely mobile processes which press towards discharge. The manifestations of a compulsion to repeat (which is described as occurring in the early activities of infantile mental life as well as among the events of psychoanalytic treatment) exhibit to a high degree an instinctual character and, when they act in opposition to the pleasure principle, give the appearance of some demonic force at work. It seems that an instinct is an urge inherent in organic life to restore an earlier state of things which the living entity has been obliged to abandon under the pressure of external disturbing forces. The instincts which watch over the destinies of the elementary organisms that survive the whole individual which provide them with a
safe shelter while they are defenseless against the stimuli of the external world, which bring about their meeting with other germ cells, etc., constitute the group of the sexual instincts. These instincts are peculiarly conservative in their resistance to external influences and that they preserve life itself. Apart from the sexual instincts, there are no instincts that do not seek to restore an earlier state of things. Both higher development and involution might be the consequences of adaption to the pressure of external forces; and in both cases, the part played by instincts might be limited to the retention of an obligatory modification. What appears in a minority of individuals as an untiring impulsion towards perfection can be understood as a result of the instinctual repression upon which is based all that is most precious in human civilization. The repressed instinct never ceases to strive for complete satisfaction. It is concluded that there is no instinct towards perfection at work in human beings. The difference in the amount between the pleasure of satisfaction which is demanded and that which is actually achieved is what provides the driving factor.

1) free and bound energies defined as the primary and the secondary process. “A failure to effect this binding would provoke a disturbance analogous to a traumatic neurosis; and only after the binding has been accomplished would it be possible for the dominance of the pleasure principle (and of its modification, the reality principle) to proceed unhindered.” (611)

2) children’s love of repetition in play and story-telling p. 611

3) compulsion to repeat: “an urge inherent in organic life to restore an earlier state of things which the living entity has been obliged to abandon under the pressure of external disturbing forces. . . an expression of the inertia inherent in organic life. . . an expression of the conservative nature of living substance” (612).

4) Humans are different from animals because of repression. “What appears in a minority of individuals as an untiring impulsion towards perfection can be understood as a result of the instinctual repression upon which is based all that is most precious in human civilization. The repressed instinct never ceases to strive for complete satisfaction.” (p. 615-16)

Part VI. Biological arguments for death instincts. [not in our excerpt]

[Abstract] ‘The ego instincts exercise pressure towards death while the sexual instincts exercise pressure towards prolongation of life. It is hypothesized that the ego instincts arise from the coming to life of inanimate matter and seek to restore the inanimate while sexual instincts aim at conjugation of the germ cell. Without this union the cell dies. The assumption that death is internal (natural) is discussed. Biological experiments dealing with organisms such as ciliate infusorian give the following 2 facts: if 2 of the animalculae (微生物), at the moment before they show
signs of senescence, are able to conjugate, they are saved from growing old and become rejuvenated. It is also probable that infusoria (纖毛蟲) die a natural death as a result of their own vital processes. It is concluded that biology does not contradict the recognition of the death instincts.

Psychoanalysis observed the regularity with which libido is withdrawn from the object and directed to the ego. By studying the libidinal development of children it was concluded that the ego is the true and original reservoir of libido, and that it is only from that reservoir that libido is extended onto objects. A portion of the ego instincts was seen to be libidinal and sexual instincts operated in the ego. Thus the distinction between these 2 instincts has changed from qualitative to topographical.

We cannot ascribe to the sexual instinct the characteristic of a compulsion to repeat. The dominating tendency of mental life (and perhaps of nervous life) is the effort to reduce, keep constant, or remove internal tension due to stimuli, a tendency which finds expression in the pleasure principle; our recognition of this fact is a major reason for believing in the existence of death instincts.”

Part VII. Summary.

[Abstract] “One of the earliest and most important functions of the mental apparatus is to bind the instinctual impulses which impinge it, to replace the primary process prevailing in them by the secondary process and convert their freely mobile cathetic energy into a mainly quiescent cathexis. The pleasure principle is a tendency operating in the service of a function to free the mental apparatus from excitation or to keep the amount of excitation in it constant or as low as possible. At the beginning of mental life the struggle for pleasure was far more intense than later but not so unrestricted.’ (625)

1) Eros, seeking to preserve and enrich life,
2) the death instinct, seeking to return life to the peace of death.

Sources: