SECTION III: THE THREE ESSAYS (1905) AND FREUD’S THEORY OF SEXUALITY

INTRODUCTION

SITUATING THE THREE ESSAYS

The resistance to infantile sexuality strengthens me in my opinion that the three essays are an achievement of comparable value to the Interpretation of Dreams. (Freud to Abraham, 12 November 1908—quoted in Gay 1988: 145)

Freud’s Three essays on the theory of sexuality (1905d; SE VII: 123-243) first appeared in 1905. Like the Traumdeutung, Freud subjected this work to numerous additions and revisions over the years (for the 1910, 1915, 1920 and 1924 editions). Importantly, crucial subsections that today are seen as being integral to the theory presented in the text—those on infantile sexual theories, on the phases of sexual development, and on the libido theory—only date back to the 1915 edition.

This partly, but only partly, explains why the Three Essays is such a troubled, unstable text: in it, contributions from various phases of Freud’s own intellectual development are juxtaposed without really being brought into a stable synthesis. Strachey himself (VII: 128) thinks that “it took some years … for [Freud] to become entirely reconciled to his own discovery.” Arnold Davidson (1987a) offers an explanation that complements Strachey’s: in the Three Essays Freud’s new way of thinking about these things coexists with the very commonplaces of XIXth Century sexology that it was supposed to supersede. Though I think that there is something to be said for both these readings, I am convinced that the tensions in the Three Essays go deeper than Davidson and Strachey suggest. If their reading had been the whole truth, it should have been possible to extract the coherent new “Freudian” doctrine from the alien, “pre-Freudian” excrescences still attaching to its first formulations in the Three Essays. I do not think that this is the case; it is then not possible to banish the aporias of this text to a safe outside of “what Freud really discovered”.

What are the Three Essays about?

In his 1914 Preface to the Third Edition, Freud specifically denies that he is giving a general theory of sexuality:

248 German: Drei Abhandlungen zur Sexualtheorie. (GW 5: 27-145)
249 In fact, proportionally the Three Essays were subjected to even more revisions than the Traumdeutung—the 1905 edition’s original 83 pages had by the final, 1925 version grown to a hefty 120 pages.
250 Though Davidson limits himself to Freud’s discussion of the perversions, this is clearly represented as paradigmatic of how one should approach the Three Essays in general.
It is impossible that these Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality should contain anything but what psycho-analysis makes it necessary to assume or possible to establish. It is, therefore, out of the question that they could ever be extended into a complete ‘theory of sexuality’, and it is natural that there should be a number of important problems of sexual life with which they do not deal at all. (130)

The three main subsections of the work are titled “The sexual aberrations”, “Infantile sexuality,” and “The transformations of puberty”. This gives some indication of the angle from which Freud attacks his topic. His interest in sexuality is of a piece with his ruling interests as a theorist and a clinician. The focus is therefore on the psychology of sex, rather than its biology.251 Similarly, it is concerned with the psychic reality of sexuality—its meanings, conscious and unconscious, rather than with truths about what is observable in abstraction from such meanings.

Freud contrasts his own approach with one that focuses exclusively on (an ideal of) “healthy” adult heterosexual genital coitus. (135) In contrast with this “popular view”, Freud investigates everything that falls outside such a focus, and tries to account systematically for it: sexual perversion, especially in its relation to psychopathology; infantile sexuality; homosexuality (especially as a component of bisexuality); the role of everything non-genital and non-coital in sexuality. In this light, what before was seen as normal, typically now becomes “normal” in scare quotes: the line between normal and abnormal is hard to draw; “abnormal” behaviour is far more common than people suppose; far from “normality” being the secure achievement of the majority of humanity, everybody is abnormal to a greater or lesser extent; moreover any normality that may have been attained is also, at best, a precarious achievement. Throughout, but with many a lapse, Freud shows an awareness of the cultural relativity of any notion of sexual health or normality. Regarding homosexuality, for instance, he goes so far as to claim that “[t]he pathological approach to the study of inversion has been displaced by the anthropological”.

(139n1)

251 In the preface to the third edition, Freud puts this more strongly: his work is “deliberately independent of the findings of biology.” (131) In the concluding paragraph of the work, he seems to take a very different tack:

We know far too little of the biological processes constituting the essence of sexuality to be able to construct from our fragmentary information [Einsichten: insights] a theory adequate to the understanding alike of normal and pathological conditions. (243; GW 145—my emphases)

The same goes for the 1920 preface to the fourth edition, where he also speaks of “a part of the theory” as lying “on the frontiers of biology”. (133) The apparent contradiction—should biology be involved or shouldn’t it—can perhaps be resolved by reading Freud as saying: the essence of sexuality lies in certain biological processes; because I have to refrain from venturing into the terrain of biology, I therefore cannot here address the essence of sexuality. But this reading fails to account for two facts: Freud does often advance biological theses, and seem discuss sexuality in its essence—his theory of libido being a case in point.
His systematic approach leads him to locate all sexual phenomena in continuous series. The continuity between the normal and the abnormal is emphasised, both in phenomenological terms—abnormal behaviour is commonly found or echoed in the behaviour and phantasies of ostensibly normal people—and in developmental terms: children are “polymorphously perverse”; all sexual aberrations are developmental disturbances—the person has remained stuck in, or regressed to, some component(s) of infantile sexuality.

Reading his correspondence with Fliess (Freud 1985c (1986)), it becomes clear that Freud’s interest in sexuality derived from his attempts to understand the aetiology of psychopathology—anxiety neurosis, neurasthenia and, later, the psychoneuroses. (Strachey SE VII: 127) A first way in which we can therefore characterise Freud’s approach to sexuality is with the phrase: sexuality, as it is relevant to the aetiology of psychopathology. Most generally, his conclusion here was that the psychoneuroses were the negative of the perversions (165): neurosis is traceable to repressed perverse impulses.

This is directly linked to the second focus of Freud’s approach: infantile sexuality. Adult sexuality can only be understood in its relation to infantile sexuality. Inasmuch as the adult subject is focused on heterosexual genital intercourse, such a focus has only been acquired imperfectly, at a late stage, and as a precarious conquest. It will at best be haunted by all the other components of infantile sexuality, which is as much as to say: all the other components of sexuality, period. A second way to characterise Freud’s approach to sexuality is therefore by emphasising his focus on infantile sexuality, including its residues in the perversions and the sexuality of adults, generally.

In the Three Essays Freud does not foreground the notion of the unconscious. Nevertheless, even where it is not explicitly mentioned, it continually makes its presence felt. Libido—and therefore sexuality—is powerfully governed by unconscious processes, for instance displacement, condensation and symbolism. We could also with as much justification say that the unconscious is governed by the sexual, for example: symbolism is a sort of Ur-language for which the organs and topological/social relations involved in sexuality provide the basic vocabulary or alphabet. A third way of characterising the focus of Freud’s approach to sexuality would therefore be: the sexual inasmuch as it governs and is governed by unconscious processes; the sexual and the unconscious in their dialectical interrelation. Inasmuch as the unconscious is always also conceived of as being essentially the infantile in the subject, the focus on the unconscious and the focus on infantile sexuality amount to the same thing.

Of course, that Freud’s theory focuses on these issues, does not mean that its scope is limited to them.
BEARING OF THE THREE ESSAYS ON OUR TOPIC

Why devote a whole section of this thesis to the Three Essays? Firstly, because it is obviously one of Freud’s classic texts, and secondly, because it introduces a new focus, sexuality, which according to Freud is so important for the way people relate to each other. It can thus be expected to have a specific bearing on our main questions.

The issues of othering, alterity, the other, and the subaltern, will arise at different places and levels in this section. The following are some of the most important questions raised:

a) How absolute or modest are Freud’s knowledge-claims in the Three Essays? Does he see sexuality as something essentially knowable, or essentially enigmatic? What deep, tenacious assumptions does he have about his topic of which he is unaware, or that he seems unable to question? Is the alterity of sexuality denied in Freud’s texts, or is sexuality in Freud on the contrary exactly conceived of in terms of radical alterity, as Bersani’s The Freudian body (1986) suggests? (See p. 305ff, below) Is it possible to formulate a (technical) language for talking about the carnal that is so powerful that it either supersedes all other discourses about this topic, or subordinates them to itself? Has Freud succeeded in giving us such a language? Similarly, is it possible to formulate a theory whereby the carnal becomes essentially knowable? If it isn’t, is this a general feature of theories about the human, or is sexuality essentially unknowable? On the other hand, if it is knowable in a theory, has Freud given us such a theory?

b) To what extent is Freud’s model of sexuality and sexual normality androcentric, i.e. conceived from, and mainly or paradigmatically applicable to men rather than women? In what sense and to what extent does his theory of sexuality therefore other women?

c) What is Freud’s attitude to the othering of other sexual minorities (homosexuals, “perverts”, prostitutes)? Does Freud himself in the Three Essays partake in such othering—for instance, by deploying a (particular) notion of sexual normality? Freud hesitates, flounders and contradicts himself when it comes to defining the notions of “normality” and “perversion”. What does this teach us about the status of these notions? What would be lost, and what gained, if we were to discard them? Does any project of devising a canonical technical language for verbalising the carnal silence people (and in that sense other them) by making alternative languages invalid, or by consigning them to an inferior position?

c) How does the subject relate to the Other in sexuality?

i) First of all, there is the issue of whether sexuality ever knows a solipsistic phase, in which it has no object or the subject has only himself as object. This is central to the disagreements between Freud and the object-relations school of psychoanalysis.

ii) If the subject is driven by the tendency to avoid unpleasure and seek pleasure, what do the complications that Freud recognises in the notion of (sexual) pleasure say about the nature of the subject’s desire for the other?
iii) To what extent is the other person (“the sexual object”) in sexuality sometimes, mostly, or always, a means to the end of (sexual) pleasure (“the sexual aim”)? What does this mean for a notion of ethics in the Kantian tradition, in which a purely instrumental view of the other would mean the absence of an ethical attitude—that is, a lack of respect—for the other? This is related to the very similar question: to what extent is sexuality basically egoistic? This in turn leads us to the question:

iv) How does Freud’s notion of sexuality relate to the notion—or rather: to various possible notions—of love?

v) Can a subject who compulsively seeks a repetition of previous—especially primal—love objects in every new love object, ever to any extent be open to the alterity (or more modestly, quiddity) of a new love object?

vi) What type of relationship to the other is typically implied by the various “component instincts” of sexuality (e.g. cruelty), and the successive organisations of the libido typically traversed during sexual development (e.g. the oral and anal phases)? What happens when some of these predominate over others? What are the implications of Freud’s view that none of these factors is ever totally overcome or totally absent, as they belong to a universal drive structure or to a normative process of sexual development? (Presumably, whoever is convinced by Freud should say, with Terence, “I am human, and regard nothing human as other to me.”) We are especially interested in the question as to the place of sadomasochism and its associated phenomena in sexuality, love and human relationships generally.

vii) In the phenomenon of being in love, we find something that at first sight is utterly alien to the order of othering: it is characteristic of being in love that the other is overvalued, rather than devalued. But perhaps such an overvaluation in its own way denies the alterity of the other as much as the more “negative” ways of othering.

viii) Freud’s remarks on the frequent incompatibility between the “sensual current” (physical desire) and the “affectionate current” (respect) bear directly on our topic. Where such an incompatibility occurs, the sexual object has to be (a) debased (one).

---

252 My translation of “homo sum, humani nil a me alienum puto.” (alienum: what is not mine; what is strange, foreign). (Heauton Timorumenos—Latin in Kauer and Lindsay 1958: Act 1, line 25) The point is that for Freud none of the fundamental human sexual possibilities—sadomasochism, anal sex, homosexuality, etc.—is ever simply absent in a person; what differs is only the relation the person has to these possibilities.
WHAT IS THIS “SEXUALITY” THAT THE THREE ESSAYS ARE ABOUT?

Freud does not define sexuality anywhere in the Three Essays. In the absence of such a definition, he has to find other ways to flesh out his extended notion of sexuality. In doing so, he is often neutral or ambivalent between a clarification of what it means to call these things sexual, and an argument for why these things should be regarded as sexual. The extension of the phenomenon of sexuality which forms the topic of the Three Essays is thus not established by definitions, but by four basic strategies:

- Criticising the narrow view of sexuality embodied in the “popular theory”
- Characterising sexuality paradigmatically or by analogy, in terms of a network of exemplary, singular phenomena. For example, the male orgasm, or a tickling sensation on the skin (phenomena which can actually play a role in sexual situations) serve as paradigmatic examples, while phenomena such as hunger or an itch serve as analogies or metaphors.

We shall see that, as the reader progresses through the Three Essays, such exemplars and analogies multiply. Simultaneously, the sexual is presented as being paradigmatic of much more in life. Thus we find ourselves in possession of an analogical series constituting both the phenomena of sexuality, and that which is analogous to them. Nowhere is there any boundary defining sexuality sensu strictu, as opposed to that which is analogous to it. We shall therefore argue that Freud offers us a sexocentric hermeneutics, a hermeneutics tending to sexualise all interpreted phenomena, rather than any factual hypothesis regarding whether anything does or does not involve “sexuality” as a circumscribed phenomenon.

- Maintaining that the various phenomena grouped together as “sexual” can under certain circumstances function as equivalents, or be exchanged for each other. If a person is for instance consistently denied his or her preferred form of sexual satisfaction, other activities will be engaged in, which offer a substitute satisfaction. It is precisely because of such substitutability that Freud designates as sexual a variety of phenomena which would normally not consistently be regarded as such.
- The use of the notion of libido and the analogies by which it is fleshed out (this can be seen as a particular interpretation of why sexual phenomena display such a remarkable degree of intersubstitutability and plasticity). The Three Essays thus seem to offer an index of the sexual: in everything sexual, libido—the specific sexual energy or sexual drive—is involved.

253 In a later work, his Introductory Lectures (1916-17a—SE XVI: 303-304), he does advance various possible definitions, only to reject them all.

254 Lest Freud seem epistemologically wayward on this score, let us recall that according to Kuhn (1970) it is not at all unusual for paradigms in natural science to be constituted in terms of exemplars instead of explicit definitions.
However, as there is no independent criterion for when libido is involved, and when not, this index turns out to be vacuous.

**FREUD’S UNDERMINING OF “POPULAR OPINION”**

It is popularly believed that a human being is either a man or a woman. \(\text{[die populäre Meinung ... gilt ein Mensch entweder als Mann oder als Weib.]}\) (141; GW 40)

Popular opinion has quite definite ideas about the nature and characteristics of [the] sexual instinct \(\text{(Geschlechstrieb: sexual drive).}\) It is generally understood to be absent in childhood, to set in at the time of puberty in connection with the process of coming to maturity and to be revealed in the manifestations of an irresistible attraction exercised by one sex upon the other; while its aim is presumed to be sexual union, or at all event actions leading in that direction. (135; GW 33)

On inspection such a view turns out to abound in “errors, inaccuracies and hasty conclusions”. (135) The whole of the *Three Essays* can be read as being directed against this view, as can be seen from a brief overview of its contents:

In the *first* section of the *Three Essays* Freud discusses the “sexual aberrations”, to show that the sexual instinct deviates from the “popular opinion” both as regards object (for instance, it need not be *a person*, let alone one of *the opposite sex*), and as regards aim (the aim need not be sexual union, but can also be a variety of other things, such as displaying oneself or looking, inflicting or undergoing pain).

In the *second* section he argues that such aberrations in adults have their roots in the “polymorphously perverse” sexual disposition typically found in all infants. Children already have sexual desires and display sexual activities; these do not centre on genital intercourse in the way normal adult sexuality supposedly does; other activities (linked to what Freud calls the “component instincts”) and other “erotogenic zones” play a major role. From a section only added to the text in 1915, we learn that human sexual development typically passes through a sequence of qualitatively very different phases. Each phase is centred on phantasies and activities involving one of the erotogenic zones—for example, the mouth, the anus, the phallus (an organ children initially ascribe to both sexes), or the genitals.

In the *third* section he discusses the complicated and uncertain developmental process whereby the polymorphously perverse disposition of the infant nevertheless issues in something roughly approximating so-called sexual normality.

To conclude, Freud gives us a “Summary”, of which only the first four odd pages (231-235) deserve the name; in the final eight pages (235-243), a new topic is broached: the “disturbances” whereby the end-product of the developmental process is abnormality rather than normality.

The “popular opinion” that Freud sketches is Platonic: the ideal and the essence are taken to coincide. Characteristically, Freud seeks to enlarge our understanding of the human by paying
scrupulous attention to all deviations from the ideal. We will thus learn more about sexuality by investigating its “abnormal”/“infantile” forms, than by limiting ourselves to its “normal”/“mature” form. “Popular opinion” thus serves as a convenient foil against which Freud can present his own, enlarged view of sexuality—enlarged so as to include both the “perversions” and infantile sexuality. Interestingly, Freud does not wholly jettison this “popular opinion”, with its link to a functionalist view of sexuality as that which serves procreation. Part of it will return in his definition of “sexual normality”, which Freud also presumes to be aimed at “sexual union, or at all event actions leading in that direction”, and which, moreover, essentially involves the “attraction exercised by one sex upon the other”.

Freud’s “popular opinion” is largely a straw man. However, it can serve as an emblem for everything Freud opposes, in the conceptual moves which are typical of the Three Essays:

- **dichotomies become continua;** “a rigorously psychoanalytic logic … breaks down the boundaries separating concepts”. (Bersani 1986: 21) Examples are the conceptual pairs normal/abnormal; health/pathology; and heterosexual/homosexual.

- inescapable, natural boundaries become arbitrary, culturally constructed ones—see for instance “Blurring the boundary between normality and abnormality” p. 232, below.

- either/or becomes both/and (according to Freud’s doctrine of bisexuality (141-144) “either male or female” becomes “both male and female”); or just problematic:
  - “We are therefore forced to a suspicion that the choice between ‘innate’ and ‘acquired’ is not an exclusive one or that it does not cover the issues involved in inversion.” (140)

- hierarchies are overturned (the abnormal in a way becomes more fundamental, closer to the essence, more original than the normal).

- opposites are related to each other in an especially intimate way (activity and passivity presuppose each other).

  the twain that shall never meet, meet
  
  - Love and hate becoming indistinguishable in the oral phase;

---

255 We say this for various reasons. It for instance deviates from the commonplaces of late XIXth Century sexology, which were already widely disseminated when Freud wrote the Three Essays. According to these, homosexuality and various perversions were already admitted to be sexual in nature. Moreover: the way in which various activities now called “perversions” were previously seen as “carnal” or “lustful” shows that, even before the advent of XIXth Century sexology, heterosexual genital intercourse had not been regarded as such an isolated phenomenon as Freud would have us think.

256 Here and in the rest of this paragraph “x becomes y” is shorthand for: “what seems to be x, or was previously held to be x, Freud on closer investigation holds to be y”. Each “becomes” in this summary thus stands for difficult intellectual—often arguably: philosophical—work. The Three Essays can even be read as a primer of philosophical strategies—exactly the strategies summarised here.
- The factor of idealisation in the perversions shows that “the highest and the lowest are always closest to each other in the sphere of sexuality” (161-162).

- the simple becomes complex\textsuperscript{257};

- “the sexual instinct may be no simple thing, but put together from components” (162; cf. 167ff);

- “In childhood … the sexual instinct is not unified”; “each [excitation] follows its own separate aim”. (233)

- In general, moncausal explanations are rejected: sexual excitation, for instance, cannot be adequately understood in terms of just one factor (hormonal or chemical; the puberty-gland as the only organ producing substances which play a role in sexual excitation (212-215)); nor can the perversions: “Under analysis [most perversions] reveal a surprising variety of motives and determinants.” (157n)

- the uniform becomes heterogeneous: homosexuality is a variegated phenomenon (146-147n); homosexuals are for instance not uniformly effeminate, as one stereotype would have it.

- self-evident concepts or beliefs become problematic, and what we thought we knew, becomes uncertain:

- “The concepts of ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’, whose meaning seems so unambiguous to ordinary people, are among the most confused that occur in science.” (219n)

- Why should opposite sexes attract each other? “From the point of view of psycho-analysis the exclusive sexual interest felt by men for women is also a problem that needs elucidating and is not a self-evident fact.” (146n)

- Infantile amnesia represents a problem: “Hitherto it has not occurred to us to feel any astonishment at the fact of this amnesia, though we might have good grounds for doing so.” (174)

For simplicity’s sake, we can summarise this cluster in terms of three exemplary operations: the demonstration that things which were apparently separate and independent of each other, are actually interrelated; the deconstruction of conceptual dichotomies; and the demonstration that the apparently simple is actually complex. All these operations will manifest themselves through the breakdown of definitions.

While studying the Three Essays I was struck by a recurrent experience: that my criticisms of Freud used exactly the sort of moves Freud himself had used in establishing his own view. Freud deconstructs the self-evidence of received dichotomies and other conceptualisations; where we criticise him, he can be argued to have insufficiently carried through the basic movement of his own thought. If the strength—the genius, even—of the Three Essays for a large part lies in the repeated application of this cluster of, roughly, “deconstructive” moves, its weakness—its

\textsuperscript{257} Cf. Neu (1991: 200-201)
blindness—mostly results from an insufficiently rigorous and consistent application of the very
same cluster of moves.

PARADIGMS AND METAPHORS FOR SEXUALITY; SEXUALITY AS A
PARADIGM OR METAPHOR FOR OTHER ASPECTS OF LIFE

All animals are equal, but some animals are more equal than others.

George Orwell (1967: 114): Animal Farm

Freud widens the conventional notion of sexuality considerably. However, his new citizens of the
city of sex are generally second class citizens compared to those conventionally recognised
as such. The field of sexuality is centred around an open-ended series of core phenomena that
provide the model for understanding other phenomena; around pleasures (those linked to male
ejaculation (205)) which are higher or more intense than other pleasures, thereby becoming
paradigmatic pleasures; around some goals and behaviours which are superior to others; around
behaviour (genital intercourse) which, in opposition to the rank and file of actions which Freud
has identified as being a sexual nature, qualifies for the description: “the sexual act itself”. (e.g.
156, 221 [GW 122]258) That Freud refers to the genitals as “the sexual apparatus” (169, quoted
above), further confirms that the paradigmatic phenomenon of sexuality for this theory is still
surprisingly close to that found in the “popular view”. Thus, although the phenomena of infantile
and perverse sexuality have important roles in the whole play of sexuality, good old heterosexual
genital intercourse still takes centre stage.

Is this a relic from narrower pre-Freudian notions of sexuality that rightfully has no place in a
mature Freudian theory of sexuality?259 If Freud’s achievement in the Three Essays lies largely in
decentrering sexuality, can his limitations not be said to lie in doing so insufficiently? Would
rewriting Freud so that sexuality forms a decentred system, characterised by a non-hierarchical
substitutability of its terms for each other, perhaps be the best way to remain true to Freud’s
fundamental intuitions or intentions? Or does it belong to the thing itself that phenomena qualify
as sexual phenomena by referring to a number of core, paradigmatically sexual phenomena? Even
if sexuality becomes a heterogeneous field, some phenomena would then still play a privileged
role in this field, otherwise it would not be recognisable as the field of sexuality. All this could
perhaps change in an nth generation psychoanalytic model, so that the varieties of sexuality
would no longer be organised hierarchically, in terms of

• what are, and what are not, paradigmatic sexual behaviours;
• understanding one form of sexuality by means of another;

258 Strachey’s translation here attaches selbst—itself—to “clitoris”, and not to “sexual act”, which to me
would have been more plausible.

259 Davidson (1987a) argues along these lines.
defining, or otherwise establishing, a notion of sexual normality.

Even if we concede the validity of identifying certain phenomena as core phenomena constitutive of the very notion of sexuality, there is still another question we can ask of Freud: does he misconstrue the variety of sexual phenomena (and experience) by generalising from some sexual phenomena to other, very different phenomena, thereby falsifying the nature of the latter? For instance: is male ejaculatory pleasure one sexual pleasure among others, or does it remain the sexual pleasure par excellence, demonstrating as no other the essence of sexual pleasure?

Freud also construes sexuality in terms of analogies or metaphors from outside the field of (what even the psychoanalyst would generally regard as) the sexual, for example hunger, or itching sensations. Here again we may ask whether Freud can convincingly be argued to misconstrue sexuality because of the bias these central metaphors introduce into his thinking on the topic.

THE GENITALS AS PARADIGM

In the section in which he discusses perversions based on the extension, beyond the genitals, of the anatomical zones on which sexual interest focuses, Freud says:

The part played by the erotogenic zones is immediately obvious in the case of those perversions which assign a sexual significance to the oral and anal orifices. These behave in every respect like a portion of the sexual apparatus. In hysteria these parts of the body and the neighbouring tracts of mucous membrane become the seat of new sensations and of changes in innervation—indeed, of processes that can be compared to erection—in just the same way as do the actual genitalia under the excitations of the normal sexual processes. (169)

260 Compare also:

Certain regions of the body, such as the mucous membrane of the mouth and the anus, which are constantly appearing in these practices, seem, as it were, to be claiming that they should themselves be regarded and treated as genitals. [T]his claim is justified by the history of the development of the sexual instinct. (152-153)

In [hysteria] repression affects most of all the actual genital zones and these transmit their susceptibility to stimulation to other erotogenic zones ..., which then behave exactly like genitals. But besides this ... any other part of the body can acquire the same susceptibility to stimulation as is possessed by the genitals and can become an erotogenic zone. (183-184—my emphasis)

The italicised sentence (whose point is repeated in two 1915 additions (184n1; 233)) makes sexuality independent of any organic predestination or intrinsic analogy with the genitals. One can imagine that as the genital analogy became more and more tenuous, the notion of libido had to take over part of the function it had initially played in giving content to the term “sexual” in the extended sense in which Freud used it. (The subsection on libido theory (217-219) was another 1915 addition). As more and more things become sexual, sex becomes less and less sexual. It becomes something more like an abstract metaphysical principle—libido, in short.
Freud had previously already spoken of the “significance of the erotogenic zones as apparatuses subordinate to the genitals and as substitutes for them”. (169) Later he also claims that the anal zone often retains a lifelong *genitale Reizbarkeit*—a lifelong susceptibility to being stimulated in the manner of the genitals. (185; GW 86) And finally, where the child experiences sensual pleasure in retaining the stool till defecation causes intense sensations in the anal zone, he says, here also maintaining the genital paradigm, that the contents of the bowels function as a forerunner to the phallus (decorously indicated as “another organ”). (186) Such passages suggest that the best rough and ready definition of an erotogenic zone is: any organ that in some way behaves strikingly like the genitals do (especially as a source of sensual pleasure).

In the absence of a definition of sexuality, such analogies with the genitals serve to give substance and credibility to Freud’s treatment of activities centred around the mouth or anus as sexual. *(Substance*: what it *means* to call such activities sexual is: “something analogous to what we usually already associate with the genitals.” *Credibility*: if we presume that the *meaning* of the term “sexual” is already clear, such analogies serve as an *argument* to also regard these activities as sexual.)

Freud frequently uses expressions which show that for all his widening of the notion of the sexual, intercourse and the genital remain for him the keystone of the sexual. What is not linked to organs or activities that are analogous to these—fetishes, for instance—is described with expressions such as “very inappropriate [sehr wenig geeignet] for sexual purposes”. (153; GW 52) Such an expression only makes sense if “sexual purposes” are understood in such a way as to exclude fetishism, that is, in a pre-Freudian way!

If other erotogenic zones are conceived of in terms of the genitals, in what terms are the genitals themselves to be conceived? This is important for an understanding of the conceptual or rhetorical structure of the *Three Essays*. Generally, for Freud (and for Lacan perhaps) the male genital tends to function as a transcendental signified. That is, it gives meaning to other things, without deriving its own meaning from other things. It is a unitary endpoint of signification. The girl wants a penis (195), but can’t get it, and therefore, Freud later concludes, has to console herself with having a baby instead. (1917c—SE XVII: 129; 1933a—SE XXII: 128; 1937c—SE XXIII: 251) We don’t read about the boy wanting a baby, and having to console himself with a

---

261 I find Strachey’s translation of the quoted German phrase by “susceptibility to genital stimulation” (185) either unclear or incorrect.

262 The mucous membrane of the vagina, on the other hand, is described as “the most appropriate object” *[dazu geeignetsten Objekt*—Strachey leaves out the superlative] for producing “the appropriate stimulation” of the glans penis. (210; GW 112)

263 The same probably goes for the notion of sex or sexuality itself. The meaning of *x* is sexual. But what is the meaning of the sexual? In Freud sex, the sexual drive and libido tend to function as transcendental signifieds, which are unaffected by the play of elements in the sexual economy.
penis instead. Moreover, the female genitals are treated as far more problematic, battling to escape from the domination of two alien models, that of the cloaca, and that of the male penis. As for the former—the female genitals never really free themselves from their initial infantile representation in terms of the cloaca: “The genital apparatus remains the neighbour of the cloaca, and actually [to quote Lou Andreas-Salomé] ‘in the case of women is only taken from it on lease.’” (187n)

As for the latter—at puberty the centre of female sexuality is supposed to be transferred from the clitoris, as simulacrum of the male penis, to the vagina, as truly female sexuality never really free themselves from their initial infantile representation in terms of the cloaca: “The genital apparatus remains the neighbour of the cloaca, and actually [to quote Lou Andreas-Salomé] ‘in the case of women is only taken from it on lease.’” (187n)

Concomitantly, the uterus and menstruation hardly feature at all. This further serves to marginalise female sexuality—if its own positivity is ignored, it must necessarily appear as a lack. In the industrialised world, the development of effective contraceptives and the liberalisation of abortion laws have made planned parenthood the norm, so that Freud’s downplaying of the role of childbearing in sexuality has been matched by a roughly comparable development in society. (‘Sexuality’ may even be the wrong word to describe the complex of phenomena, centred on fertility and childbearing, that in traditional society preceded what we in ours denote as ‘sexual’ phenomena.) Our modern iconic Venuses are not defined by their childbearing capacity in the way the Venus of Willendorf was. Nevertheless, our society needs to be reminded (by psychoanalysis, for instance) that in sexuality not only the sexes, but also the generations are involved—something traditional societies hardly ever forgot. (In traditional African sculpture the navel—a physical reminder of our link to our mothers—is often made especially obtrusive; something quite foreign to the Western iconography of the body).

The clear-cut distinction [reinliche Scheidung—clean separation] between anal and genital processes which is later insisted upon is contradicted by the close anatomical and functional analogies and relations which hold between them. (187n; GW 88n)

These analogies and relations are conducive to seeing them as possible substitutes or equivalents for each other. The conceptual and evaluative distinctions between them then function as dams or resistances that are superimposed on this. “The anus and genitals are two utterly distinct things; the one cannot stand in for the other” is superimposed upon a more primitive order, in which confusion, contamination and substitutability characterise the relation between the two: “the anus and the genitals are variants or aspects of one and the same thing”.

In a formulation reminiscent of the one in which the vagina is said to be taken “on lease” from the cloaca, Freud said that (in both sexes?) early masturbatory genital impulses usually do not display themselves as such, but “are mostly displayed on behalf of the still undeveloped sexual apparatus by the urinary apparatus, which thus acts, as it were, as the former’s trustee.” [für den noch unentwickelten Geschlechtsapparat gibt meist der Harnapparat, gleichsam als sein Vormund, Zeichen.] (190; GW 90)
organ.\textsuperscript{266} Moreover, Freud first says that “the sexuality of little girls” is of a male nature, and then that

if we were able to give a more definite connotation to the concepts of ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’, it would be possible to maintain that libido is invariably and necessarily \textit{[regelmässig und gesetzmässig]} of a masculine nature, whether it occurs in men or in women and irrespectively of whether its object is a man or a woman. (219; GW 120-121)

In a 1915 footnote Freud glosses “masculine” here as “active”, and adds that nobody is ever purely masculine or feminine, active or passive. However, the disturbing implication that a woman’s libido makes her less feminine remains. So, the woman must fight the girl (tomboy?) in herself, as having a male form of sexuality, and being focused on the penis-like clitoris, must battle against the confusion of the anus and the vagina, and struggle not to become defeminised by the masculinity of her libido. Or is it perhaps the male (and Freud, first of all) who confuses the vagina with the anus, the clitoris with the penis, and activity with masculinity?

\textbf{THUMB-SUCKING, HUNGER, ITCHES AND TICKLING SENSATIONS: SOLIPSISTIC MODELS FOR SEXUALITY}

When it comes to infantile sexuality, however, \textit{thumb-sucking} is treated as the paradigmatic sexual activity: “Among the manifestations of infantile sexuality I shall take thumb-sucking … as model”. (GW 80)\textsuperscript{267} In response to those who object to Freud’s interpretation of thumb-sucking as a sexual activity, he says:

Their objection raises a difficult question and one which cannot be evaded: what is the general characteristic which enables us to recognize the sexual manifestations of children?

The concatenation \textit{[Zusammenhang—interrelation]} of phenomena into which we have been given insight by psycho-analytic investigation justifies us, in my opinion, in regarding thumb-sucking as a sexual manifestation and in choosing it for our study of the essential features of infantile sexual activity. (180-181)

\textsuperscript{266} Perhaps we should balk not (only) at Freud’s decentring of the female genitals, but (also) at the relatively unambivalent status given to the male organ, as if it contains its identity in itself, transcending the differentiality of the sexual system to which it is supposed to belong, and transcending the processes of substitution, transformation, condensation and displacement psychoanalysis sees at work everywhere else in that system.

\textsuperscript{267} Partly my translation; I choose to translate “Muster” with “model”, rather than “sample”, as Strachey does. (179) Freud’s subsequent remark that “the essential features of infantile sexual activity” will be revealed when we study thumb-sucking (181) seems to vindicate my translation here.
Note that Freud declines to give a general criterion for the sexual; his arguments for seeing thumb-sucking as sexual, are contextual. He subsequently (181) proceeds to derive the essential features of infantile sexuality from this one paradigmatic example.\textsuperscript{268}

Thumb-sucking … has already given us the three essential characteristics of an infantile sexual manifestation. \textit{[Sexualäusserung]} At its origin it attaches itself to \textit{[entsteht in Anlehnung an]} one of the vital somatic functions; it has as yet no sexual object, and is thus auto-erotic; and its sexual aim is dominated by an erotogenic zone. It is to be anticipated that these characteristics will be found to apply equally to most of the other activities of the infantile sexual instincts. (182-183; GW 182)

Previously, Freud had described the second feature thus:

\begin{quote}
The instinct is directed not towards other people, but obtains satisfaction from the subject’s own body \textit{[es befriedigt sich am eigenen Körper].} (181; GW 81)
\end{quote}

Making thumb-sucking paradigmatic is part of Freud’s initial strategy of emphasising the discontinuity between infantile and adult sexuality: the former is typically auto-erotic and organised around erotogenic zones other than the genitals, whereas the latter is paradigmatically object-oriented and genital. Freud will repeatedly contradict or qualify this emphasis on the discontinuity between infantile and adult sexuality by supplementary emphases on the importance of the genitals and the prevalence of object-oriented sexual manifestations, even in childhood.\textsuperscript{269} (This issue will be discussed at length below—p. 249ff).

However, thumb-sucking is itself presented in terms that derive from genital sexuality and its pleasures: the “complete absorption of the attention” in thumb-sucking “leads either to sleep or even to a motor reaction in the nature of an orgasm.” (180)\textsuperscript{270} Macmillan, referring to Bieber (1975), who claims that this parallel with genital orgasm is already not in the least borne out by Lindner’s studies to which Freud refers (179-180), argues that subsequent empirical research on thumb-sucking and other (supposed) manifestations of the component instincts does not confirm Freud’s views either. (Macmillan 1991: 309ff) In fact “none of the activities” concerned “typically follows a pattern of building up to a climax followed by a relaxation.” (Macmillan 1991: 311) If Macmillan is right, we have to conclude that the genital analogy that according to

\textsuperscript{268} While contextual considerations may be enough for an interpretation of specific cases, I suspect that they are insufficient when constructing a general theory, which presents itself as being valid across a wide variety of contexts, or even all contexts.

\textsuperscript{269} In the “Summary”, for instance, Freud remarks that “[t]he nature of [the infantile] sexual manifestations was found to be predominantly masturbatory.” (234) His fluctuations on such points should remind us how much scope there always is for arbitrary choice concerning whether to stress the continuities between any two phenomena, or the discontinuities.

\textsuperscript{270} Freud similarly compares the blissful sleep of the infant after suckling the breast with that of the adult (male?) after coitus. (182)
my reading of Freud is essential for establishing the sexual nature of anything, breaks down when it comes to thumb-sucking.271

Freud could have followed a different approach, and conducted a Wittgensteinian phenomenology of a number of heterogeneous, but interrelated infantile phenomena, rather than finding in one thing the essence of all infantile sexual phenomena. It would then have been natural to discuss thumb-sucking and suckling at the breast together. The latter cannot be conceived in auto-erotic terms. It would then be plausible to assume that the “auto-erotic” phenomenon of thumb-sucking is an ersetzung for the prior, non-auto-erotic phenomenon of drinking at the mother’s breast. Auto-erotism would then not be primary.

In fact, elsewhere Freud explicitly admits as much. In

the oral or … cannibalistic pregenital organization … sexual activity has not yet been separated from the ingestion of food … The object of both activities is the same; the sexual aim consists in the ingestion of the object … A relic of this constructed phase of organization … may be seen in thumb-sucking, in which the sexual activity, detached from the nutritive activity, has substituted for the extraneous object one situated in the subject’s own body. (198)

Discussing the way in which “preparations have been made from earliest childhood” for the task of finding an object in puberty, Freud repeats this idea:

At a time at which the first beginnings of sexual satisfaction are still linked with the taking of nourishment, the sexual instinct has a sexual object outside the infant’s own body in the shape of his mother’s breast. It is only later that the instinct loses that object, just at the time, perhaps, when the child is able to form a total idea of the person to whom the organ that is giving him satisfaction belongs. As a rule the sexual instinct then becomes auto-erotic … The finding of an object is in fact a refinding of it. (222)

The object-oriented sexuality of puberty and beyond it would thus in a certain sense be a return to an initial, pre-auto-erotic sexual position. However, Freud derives the general features of infantile sexuality not from breast-feeding, but from thumb-sucking.

Freud’s words here suggest that the infant initially relates only to a breast, not to the mother. It is probably true that the child initially experiences the mother from the perspective of its own needs

271 Unfortunately, I chanced upon Macmillan’s book only as I was completing the body of my thesis. I was able to use some of its material on Freud’s theory of sexuality in support of my general argument. This is a book that problematises Freud far more forcefully than Grünbaum (1984) or Erwin (1996) do, whose arguments mostly derive from philosophy of science and methodology. There are substantial parallels between Macmillan’s critique of Freud’s theory of sexuality and my own. He also adduces material indicating more empirical and conceptual problems in Freud than those I recognised. On the other hand, I would claim that I have better understood the general logic of Freud’s theory of sexuality, and its value in reducing the othering of sexual ‘deviance’, than has Macmillan.
and developmental stage, and therefore in a very different way than later, when something like the concept of a person has been acquired. Nonetheless, it is not at all plausible that the child experiences the breast as a separate entity, a specific organ from which satisfaction is obtained. A breast is utterly continuous with the rest of the mother’s body, otherwise the two breasts, or today’s breast and yesterday’s breast, would probably also not be related to each other more than the breasts of two different women. It is only language that allows one, *later*, to identify *breast* as a “separate” *organ*. To such philosophical arguments we can of course add common-sensical or experimental evidence concerning the importance of the mother’s person as a whole: what we can later separately name as voice, heartbeat, scent, face, hands, warmth and gait (not to mention her total attitude to the baby, and total style of interacting with it).

Freud also characterises the sexual in terms of the analogies of hunger, itching, and a tickling sensation. Libido, the sexual drive, is *like hunger*:

> The fact of the existence of sexual needs in human beings and animals is expressed in biology by the assumption of a ‘sexual instinct’, on the analogy of the instinct of nutrition, that is of hunger. Everyday language possesses no counterpart to the word ‘hunger’, but science makes use of the word ‘libido’ for that purpose. (135)

> The normal sexual aim is regarded as being … copulation, which leads to a release of the sexual tension and a temporary extinction of the sexual instinct—a satisfaction analogous to the sating of hunger. (149)

I have many reservations about this comparison. Freud treats sexuality as simultaneously biological, psychological and culturally determined; inasmuch as hunger and eating are treated as something purely biological, it will be reductionistic to use them as analogies for sexuality.273

Freud keeps on referring to the “peculiar” or “particular” sensations or qualities that would distinguish sexuality from other phenomena, but does not fill us in on what this peculiarity is. His only attempts, as far as I could ascertain, are those involving comparisons with itching and

> 272 On p. 148, these two phenomena are *contrasted*, however: the objects of the libido vary far more than those of hunger.

> 273 A problem occurs here which dogs all of Freud’s texts: that none of the “phenomena” he wants to take as paradigmatic, is singular or homogeneous. The words “hunger”, “itching” and “tickling sensation” can each refer to a variety of different phenomena, which do not obey the same model, even before they become metaphors for something else. E.g. a pleasant or an unpleasant hunger (tickling, or itching); human and animal eating; savouring delicious food in a marvellous social setting as a form of celebration, vs. gobbling up disgusting food so as to survive. Hunger, whether pleasant or unpleasant, is linked to a tendency to eat, and we tend to scratch, whether or not this alleviates the itching. This already suggests that Freud may have taken a fateful turning in trying to reduce motivation to constancies at the supposedly more primitive level of pleasure and unpleasure.

We have here done unto Freud what he elsewhere does unto others: argue that what is treated as uniform is actually heterogeneous.
tickling sensations occurring in conjunction with stimuli of a rhythmic nature. In the following passage, the arousal of an erotogenic zone is compared with itching:

The state of being in need of a repetition of the satisfaction reveals itself in two ways: by a peculiar feeling of tension, possessing, rather, the character of unpleasure, and by a sensation of itching or stimulation \[\text{[Juck- oder Reizempfindung]}\] which is centrally conditioned and projected on to the peripheral erotogenic zone. (184; GW 184)

Note that itching is often not taken away by scratching, so that its use as a model for sexuality would make the very notion of sexual satisfaction problematic. Note also the vagueness of the phrases “peculiar feeling of tension” and “sensation of stimulation”.274 The same may be said of the words “particular quality” in the next quote, where Freud tells us that in an erotogenic zone stimuli of a certain sort evoke a feeling of pleasure possessing a particular quality. … A rhythmic character must play a part among them and \text{the analogy of tickling is forced upon our notice.} [\text{die Analogie mit dem Kitzelreiz drängt sich auf—the analogy of a tickling stimulus imposes itself}] (183; GW 90—my emphases)

Whereas the tickling sensation is here used as a model for the nature of sexually satisfying stimuli, just a few pages further down it is used to characterise sexual arousal:

The sexual excitation of early infancy returns … as a centrally determined tickling stimulus which seeks satisfaction in masturbation. (190)

All these analogies contribute to a solipsistic model of sexuality—as does Freud’s way of accentuating and thematising the erotogenic zones, generally. None of these essentially seems to relate us to another person. Where another person \text{is} involved, he or she seems to serve an instrumental function: as a means to satisfy hunger, to take away an itch, or to supply a pleasant tickling sensation. The fact that even skin and mucous membranes generally serve as ways of orienting ourselves towards that which lies outside our body tends to be lost in Freud’s account. (Think of how the baby explore furniture, toys, and so on with its mouth). If we ask: “Tell me what your hand feels,” answers describing a (per definition object-less)275 sensation, like “a tickling feeling” will be exceptional, whereas world-oriented descriptions such as “Mary’s hand”, “the top of the table”, “your hair” will be common as rain. (Freud’s account of sexuality typically makes private, essentially non-intentional sensations the primary data of perception, in exactly the way Wittgenstein, Austin and phenomenology have trenchantly criticised). Subsequently, Freud also interprets a paradigmatically object-oriented sense like sight as obeying his solipsistic

274 Cf. note 299.
275 To speak the language of “sensations” is to depart from the object-oriented language in which we generally describe what we perceive.
reading of the other erotogenic zones. Seeing somebody then becomes a sensation in the eye, as an erotogenic zone, just as touching somebody becomes a matter of “tactile sensations”.276 (156)

Hunger and itching also serve Freud’s theory in another way. Freud’s model of the psychical apparatus (cf. Sections 1 and 2, above) makes of it basically a machine that is automatically regulated by pleasure and unpleasure. Hunger and itching are (paradigmatically, but not invariably) both cases in which we are motivated to do something (eat or scratch) to alleviate an unpleasant sensation in some part of our body. If one takes them as model for how sexual desire (or “the sexual drive”) works, one expects that sexual desire will in itself be something unpleasant. Pleasure will lie in the removal of an intrinsically unpleasant sexual tension. Freud is perspicacious enough to resist the pressure of these models, and admit that sexual desire is itself generally experienced as pleasurable. However, having noted the aporias to which his models lead him, Freud does not conclude that these models may be inappropriate. (See The nature of pleasure and unpleasure, p. 225, below)

SEXUALITY AS PARADIGM FOR LIFE

If the meaning of the term “sexuality” is constituted by a set of open-ended analogies, this already presents serious problems for any putative distinction between the sexual and the non-sexual (for instance, the distinction between sexual aggression or cruelty and non-sexual variants of the same; or between a sublimation that is not encumbered by its sexual origin and those transformations of the aim of libido that still remain sexualised). Freud further complicates

---

276 I recall how, at the age of four or five, I hit upon the idea that people had perhaps hitherto been mistaken; perhaps one sees with one’s mouth, not with one’s eyes. So I closed my eyes and opened my mouth, and of course discovered that I was wrong. Psychoanalysis may find this portrait of the philosopher-artist as a young man interesting, indicating as it does the possibility of an oral mode of scopophilia. However, I mention it in this context to illustrate that seeing is not intrinsically experienced as a sensation in a particular organ, the eye.

Two examples show how hard it is to say what sensations one “really experiences”:

- When we eat something, part of the total flavour we ascribe to our food is derived from the nose, and part from the tongue. We are usually not able to separate the contribution of each, i.e. discern which sensations we have in our nose, and which on our tongue. (Different parts of the tongue contain the sensors for sweetness, sourness, bitterness, saltiness. Here, similarly, we are generally not aware of tastes being linked to sensations in one part of the tongue rather than another).

- If one rubs a finger over one’s upper lip, it is not clear which sensation is experienced in the lip, and which in the finger. If the lip goes numb after a visit to the dentist, the sensation in the finger seems to change as well.

In our awareness of somebody else as, say, anxious, we are usually unable to say exactly how this awareness relates to our various senses: what has been contributed by the senses of sight, hearing, smell or touch, and what schemata or memories have also played a role here.
matters by also making sexual phenomena paradigmatic of many other aspects of life. For instance:

What we describe as a person’s character is built up to a considerable extent from the material of sexual excitations and is composed of instincts that have been fixed since childhood, of constructions achieved by means of sublimation, and of other constructions, employed for effectively holding in check perverse impulses which have been recognized as unutilizable. The multifariously perverse sexual disposition of childhood can accordingly be regarded as the source of a number of our virtues, in so far as through reaction-formation it stimulates their development. (238-239, from a section on “Sublimation”)

In *Civilisation and its discontents* Freud will later speak of man’s discovery that sexual (genital) love afforded him the strongest experience of satisfaction, and in fact provided him with the prototype of all happiness (1930a—SE XXI: 101)

---

277 The context suggests that ‘character’ here does not function as a synonym for the neutral term ‘personality’. It refers, rather, to something positive, strength of character (cf. ‘a man of character’, or: ‘he is without character’) or the virtues (cf. the final sentence in our quote).

278 Note that the sexual phenomenon that is taken as paradigmatic here is a fairly circumscribed one, in contrast to the widened conception of sexuality that Freud generally uses.

Previously in the same work, he formulated it thus:

One of the forms in which love manifests itself—sexual love—has given us our most intense experience of an overwhelming sensation of pleasure and has thus furnished us with a pattern for our search for happiness. (1930a—SE XXI: 82)

It is interesting to relate such pronouncements to various passages elsewhere, such as the following one from the *Three Essays*:

There are thus good reasons why a child sucking at his mother’s breast has become the prototype of every relation of love. The finding of an object is in fact a refinding of it. (222)

Some lines down, love is related to happiness: the later love object will be chosen so as “to restore the happiness that has been lost.” (222) On 28 May 1899 (Freud 1985c (1986): 387) he had written to Fliess (apropos of Schliemann, the discoverer of Troy):

There is happiness only as fulfilment of a child’s wish. (English in Gay 1988: 172)

Needless to say, there are interesting tensions between all these pronouncements. The prototype of love is oral (sucking). The prototype of a love object is the mother or nurse at whose breast we suckled. The prototype of happiness is oral (satisfaction of hunger and infantile oral sexuality). The prototype of happiness is genital (satisfaction of adult genital sexuality). The prototype of happiness is infantile (the fulfilment of an infantile wish; or restoring “the happiness that has been lost”). It is not clear how the tensions between Freud’s various favoured paradigmatic phenomena (here: sex, love, the oral, the infantile, the genital, the mature) should be resolved. There is for instance no clear hierarchical order between them. As such tensions often occur between passages written in the same
It is very hard to disentangle what in such statements is an empirical claim, and what a metaphorical pronouncement.

INTERCONNECTION, SUBSTITUTABILITY, AND THE NOTION OF LIBIDO

According to our account thus far, Freud does not discuss sexuality at the level of putative essences, in abstraction from concrete sexual phenomena in their diversity and interconnectedness. Our description has up to this point not presupposed any essence of sexuality; Freud seems to rather treat sexual phenomena as bound together, inter alia, by family resemblances. However, Freud departs from such an approach in at least two ways:

• **Firstly**, by his conception of a sexual economy—the idea that items in the open-ended, diverse series of phenomena comprising sexuality to some extent can be (and are) exchanged for each other when circumstances favour this. This seems to militate against the Wittgensteinian adage that “a thing is itself and not something else”.

• **Secondly**, and more importantly for our present context, by his concomitant notion of libido as something abstract, uniform and quantifiable. Libido ascribes an essence to sexuality, and thus seems to solve the problem of demarcation. Either something involves libido, and is therefore sexual, or it doesn’t.

Freud’s biggest innovation regarding sexuality was probably to treat a wide variety of phenomena—those he designates as sexual phenomena—as forming a single, continuous, interconnected field. This is just one instance, albeit an extremely important one, of a strategy widely used by Freud: treating what is generally taken to be separate, as richly interconnected. These interconnections are heterogeneous:

• **Historical interconnection**, for instance, where the choice of a fetish is determined by a sexual impression stemming from early childhood. (154)

• **Symbolic interconnection**, and interconnection by association or associative chains. These are not explicitly discussed in the Three Essays, but they are prominent in the Traumdeutung and his case studies, and essential to Freud’s approach to sexuality.

• **Interconnection through similarities, analogies, etc.** Thumb-sucking is like masturbation; the infant’s blissful sleep after breast-feeding is like the adult’s after coitus. There is “complete agreement” (167) in the details of perversion and neurosis, which show that sexuality is centrally involved in each of them.
• **Interconnection through substitutability or transformability;** a “tendency to displacement”.

(183; here said of the erotogenic zones) The sexual instinct, being the “most unruly of all the instincts” (161), is characterised by its striking degree of “plasticity”; it is revealing that it

permits of so much variation in its objects and such a cheapening [Herabsetzung — debasement, disparagement] of them—which hunger, with its far more energetic retention of its objects, would only permit in extreme circumstances. (148; GW 47)

As Freud later puts it in “Instincts and their vicissitudes”, the sexual instincts are distinguished by possessing the capacity to act vicariously for one another to a wide extent and by being able to change their objects readily. In consequence of the latter properties they are capable of functions which are far removed from their original purposive actions. (1915c—SE IV: 126)

Let us investigate some of the countless examples where this notion of substitutability occurs in the *Three Essays*:

The symptoms of hysterical patients … are substitutes—transcriptions, as it were—for a number of emotionally cathected mental processes, wishes and desires, which … have been prevented from obtaining discharge in psychical activity that is admissible to consciousness. (164)

The sexual life of these persons is expressed—whether exclusively or principally or partly—in these symptoms. (163)

“Neuroses are, so to say, the negative of perversions” (165)—if one represses strong perverse tendencies, one is likely to become neurotic. Neurosis is often the successor to an earlier stage of manifest perversion. The erotogenic zones act as “substitutes” for the genitals. (169)

Masochism is a “transformation [Umbildung] of sadism” (158; GW 57)—the masochist is a sadist who substitutes himself for the other as object of his sadism. The fetish replaces the object because of a symbolic connection between them. (155)

Treating the variegated phenomena constituting sexuality as a single interconnected network simultaneously implies that each node in the network is not constituted by its internal, substantive quiddity, but by its differential relations to all the other nodes. Everything is permeated by alterity, and thus wholly determined by its relation to what it is not.

Freud’s later elaboration (1915), in the *Three Essays*, of the notion of libido as a specific sexual energy, attaches a particular, highly tendentious interpretation to the idea of

---

281 This quote ends in words that, though relevant to this subsection, do not form part of my argument at this point: “—capable, that is, of `sublimation`.” (1915c—SE IV: 126)
substitutability. Whereas he had previously described the sexual economy as a barter system, in which all sorts of concrete phenomena can be substituted for other concrete phenomena, his introduction of libido does away with barter, so that all transactions are henceforth conducted via this common currency. In this way the commensurability, and therefore potential substitutability, of all sexual phenomena is guaranteed. The value of any item is now expressible in the common currency, rather than in its substitutability for other items.

- **Interconnection through opposition.** The field of sexuality is traversed by numerous constitutive oppositions, such as male/female, active/passive, sadism/masochism, voyeurism/exhibitionism. (Cf. 159-160) Each term in such an opposition can only be itself thanks to its intrinsic, complex relation to the other with which it forms an oppositional pair.  

- **Interconnection as implied by Freud’s hydraulic and energetic metaphors for libido.** The idea here is of a fixed quantity that can flow between communicating vessels. Sexual phenomena do not occupy discrete pigeonholes, but form part of one extended system of “inter-communicating pipes”.

  The various channels along which libido passes are related to each other from the very first like inter-communicating pipes, and we must take the phenomenon of collateral flow into account. (151n1)

  In both these cases the libido behaves like a stream whose main bed has become blocked. It proceeds to fill up collateral channels which may hitherto have been empty. (170)

We also hear of

the mental forces which … impede the course of the sexual instinct and, like dams, restrict its flow. (177)  

Freud’s sexual energetics follows a similar pattern to that found in his sexual hydraulics. The pleasure resulting from the stimulation of the erotogenic zones

leads to an increase in tension which in its turn is responsible for producing the necessary motor energy for the conclusion of the sexual act. (210)

The production of sexual excitation … produces a store of energy which is employed to a great extent for purposes other than sexual. (232)

---

282 Reaction-formations can also be subsumed under this heading: a pronounced concern for others can be a reaction-formation against the subject’s own cruel impulses. (Laplanche and Pontalis 1973: 378)

283 It is well known that Freud uses hydraulic metaphors extensively. (Perhaps critics who focus on these, underestimate the number and weight of all Freud’s other metaphors and analogies, such as those we discussed above). When Freud speaks of the “Sources [Quellen] of Infantile Sexuality” (200; GW 101), and the “multiple sources” of sexual excitation in children (232) we again have a water metaphor (which Freud recognises as a “figurative expression” on p. 205). The term ‘tension’ fits into the energy/electricity/water model as well (in the case of water tension is comparable to pressure), as do the terms “dams” (cf. note 324, below), ‘Abfuhr’ (GW 63), and ‘Zufuhr’ (cf. note 284, following).
In sublimation the energy of infantile sexual impulses is diverted, wholly or in great part, from their sexual use and directed [zugeführt]\(^{284}\) to other ends. (128; GW 85)

These hydraulic and energetic metaphors tend to be linked to a zero-sum representation of the distribution of libido. Women who remain attached to their parents make cold wives and remain sexually anaesthetic. We learn from this that sexual love and what appears to be non-sexual love for parents are fed from the same sources. (227)

The same goes for the relation between ego-libido and object-libido, as this is portrayed in the 1915 section on libido theory:

When it [the object-libido] is withdrawn from objects, it is held in suspense in peculiar conditions of tension and is finally drawn back into the ego, so that it becomes ego-libido once again. (217-218)

LIBIDO AS A MEANS OF SUPPLYING SEXUALITY WITH AN ESSENCE AND DEMARCATING IT FROM ITS OTHERS

If we take seriously Freud’s qualifications to his basic model, whereby all organ-specificity and object-specificity seems to be lost, he probably cannot maintain sexuality as a bounded phenomenon without recourse to an essence. The notion of libido as a specifically sexual energy that is abstract, uniform and quantifiable, supplies this essence. We noted previously that libido seems to solve the problem of demarcation by ascribing an essence to sexuality: either something involves libido, and is therefore sexual, or it doesn’t. The alternative—not regarding sexuality as something bounded—would probably not have occurred to Freud, or, if it had, would have been pointedly rejected.

Whereas “sexuality” had hitherto seemed to be a vague term, depending on a cluster of open-ended metaphors, “libido” could seem to be a beautifully regulated theoretical term, that is independent of the vagaries of all the other terms or metaphors involved in Freud’s description of sexuality. However, Freud does not actually succeed in playing a self-contained language game with it; it remains a supplement to his other terms and metaphors.

The most general formulation of Freud’s model of sexuality is probably to be found in the notion of a \textit{libidinal economy}. The possibility of transformations and substitutions between a whole range of phenomena that previously had not been considered sexual, and a cluster of “clearly sexual” phenomena (coitus, various ways of stimulating the genitals, etc.), marks the former as also being “sexual” in Freud’s sense. The notion of libido serves as a common currency (\textit{libido}) that enables and guarantees the transitivity of such processes of transformation and substitution.

\(^{284}\) \textit{Zuführungsleitung} means feed-pipe; Freud’s terminology seems to have hydraulic connotations even here.
“£ibido” is what makes the diverse phenomena which psychoanalysis treats as sexual, commensurable. Thanks to this notion, we are reassured that they have a common essence, that can be found in each and every one of them.

This model is beautifully elegant. However, it only makes sense if there is a clear boundary to the sexual. Freud does not supply such a boundary. There is no antipode to Freud’s sexualising hermeneutics. Once we are inside psychoanalysis, we can never say: “the love relationship between M and N is purely non-sexual”, or “pleasure p is clearly non-sexual”. There is no criterion guaranteeing the non-sexual nature of any phenomenon of love or pleasure. This does not in the least bother me. Part of the strength of psychoanalysis is exactly that it introduces us to a world without such guarantees.

In Freud’s vision, the sexual is permeated by the unconscious, which, in Freud’s familiar phrase, “does not know negation.” Or, to understand psychic reality, “just connect”. Do not presuppose a disjunction—or believe a priori a subject’s avowal of a disjunction—between any phenomenon and any particular category, i.e., phenomena belonging to any particular category. Sexuality is not an isolated preserve of the mental; the seemingly most remote areas of mental life can turn out to be connected to the sexual, often in very direct and intimate ways. Freud often adduces compelling reasons for seeing putatively non-sexual phenomena as transformations of, or substitutes for, clearly sexual ones, and this is partly where his genius lies.

If I therefore put question marks behind Freud’s theory of sexuality, it is not to reassert the “purity” of any phenomenon, its a priori and guaranteed distance from the clearly sexual. My aim is a different one: to ask where the sexual—or libidinal—ends, and something else starts, according to Freud. I do not think that Freud gives any (satisfactory) answer to this question. Instead of a homogeneous sexual field, in which transformations and substitutions under conditions of full commensurability occur, we have a heterogeneous cluster, with a core of more or less clearly “sexual” phenomena—themselves very heterogeneous, and most probably not sharing an essence. The more we are convinced that a phenomenon communicates with one or more of these paradigmatic “sexual” phenomena, the more inclined we will be to see it as “sexual”, or having a “sexual” dimension or motivation.

However, there will be no reserve bank, no Sexual Bank of England, issuing and guaranteeing a common currency, the £ibido, to underwrite such moves. There will be no criterion demarcating the sexual from the non-sexual—contrary to Freud’s suggestion that in all cases of sexuality £ibido is involved, something that can by definition be transferred between any two sexual phenomena, thereby making them commensurable.

Freud makes much of the unbroken series connecting different sexual phenomena to each other. But what about the unbroken series between the sexual and the non-sexual? Freud repeatedly distinguishes between sexual and non-sexual phenomena as if he has a criterion for the sexual. However, he doesn’t, and nor do we.

Libido, at an abstract level, suggests the unproblematic unity of sexuality as an entity or phenomenon, while a close (often Derridean) reading of Freud’s text, and a close (often Wittgensteinian) investigation of the phenomena and language of sexuality show that this is problematic. There are no (convincing) arguments in the Three Essays why the sexual should constitute a separate phenomenon; in other words, why there should be a dichotomy between those phenomena that are manifestations of libido, and those that aren’t. The very introduction of the notion of “libido” begs the question that Freud does not answer elsewhere: how do we distinguish between the sexual and the rest?

We have seen that Freud, in an almost Wittgensteinian way, gives substance to his notion of sexuality not through the use of definitions, but by a family of interconnected phenomena, as if to say: “by sexuality I mean such phenomena, and others connected or similar to it in certain ways”. Such a procedure is quite acceptable. But what is introduced in this way, is not bounded against an opposite. Moreover, Freud’s problems don’t end here. He in fact establishes so many ways in which sexuality is the paradigm or prototype for other spheres of life, that the system of analogies whereby his notion of sexuality is supposed to be constituted, ends up constituting far more: a sexocentric view of life. Freud may be as justified in claiming that he is not a pan-sexualist as Wittgenstein would be in denying that he is a pan-ludicist. However, neither can tell us when something is not sex, or not a Spiel. (This is all the more true because each makes his Urphänomen internally complex, as well as heterogeneous in its manifestations).

285 A 1910 footnote addresses our question without quite answering it:

Modern education, as we know, makes great use of games [des Sports] in order to divert young people from sexual activity. It would be more correct to say that in these young people it replaces sexual enjoyment by pleasure in movement—and forces sexual activity back to one of its auto-erotic components. (203n2; GW 104n)

286 Bersani argues that Freud’s later conceptualisation of life vs. death drives runs into similar problems as his attempts to distinguish the sexual from the non-sexual. (See p. 312, below).

287 Freud denies the charge of pan-sexualism in his 1920 Preface to the fourth edition of the Three Essays. (134)
With the introduction of the notion of libido Freud gives us a new vision of sexuality as a differential network of interconnected phenomena, in which an almost endless variety of substitutions is possible. This system makes one think of Saussure’s *langue*—a system in which only differences exist. Derrida, while being sympathetic to Saussure’s general approach to language in terms of difference, voices some powerful objections to Saussure, one of which is that it is impossible to delineate a system of language, to disentangle it from its (apparently) non-linguistic context.288 (Wittgenstein’s later view of language would imply a similar objection). When we say that it is impossible to draw a line between the sexual and the non-sexual, this objection to Freud is similar to such a Derridean or Wittgensteinian objection to Saussure.

We are therefore forced to admit that sexual phenomena are heterogeneous, that they do not share an essence, and that there is no criterion for distinguishing between the sexual and the non-sexual. The dichotomy sexual/non-sexual must be deconstructed with all the other ones Freud himself has deconstructed. This paves the way for a non-reductionist reappropriation of Freud. The discovery of a sexual charge in a particular person’s religiosity, charitable work, passion for biology, will not necessarily make it any less religious, charitable or scientific. Against Wittgenstein’s “Everything is what it is, and not another thing”, we could say: “Being another thing does not have to make anything any less what it is”—it does however make it more complex, ambiguous and ambivalent than it may have seemed at first sight.289 If everything is impure, then our dread of the impure becomes pointless; the impure can have all the excellence possible in the precarious sublunary world. On the other hand, the Freudian world is permeated by flaws, *in general*. It is generally impure and *everything but* excellent.

Instead of specifying an essence to sexuality, let us rather acknowledge that sexuality is not a circumscribed phenomenon. (Whether anything should be regarded as—repressed, sublimated, etc.—sexuality will sometimes be more a factual question, and sometimes more a matter of

288 Derrida has another objection to Saussure: his privileging of spoken language is incompatible with his principle of the arbitrary nature of the sign. Could Freud’s privileging of adult heterosexual genital intercourse be similarly criticised? Saussure and Freud can both be criticised along Derridean lines for first discovering the novelty of a *decentred* system, and then undoing their theoretical advance by recentring the system. They could both however also be defended against this charge in a similar way: there are certain biological facts whereby the voice, or adult heterosexual genital intercourse, are not simply arbitrary variants of signs or sexuality, respectively. Freud of course had never formulated, for the field of sexuality, any principle as far-reaching as the arbitrariness of the sign; what he does do, time and again, is to emphasise the *underdetermination* of sexuality by biology, and the *often* extremely arbitrary (and therefore *always* partly arbitrary) nature of what is found disgusting, i.e., of the distinction between what is and what is not considered to be perverse.

289 I *would,* however, argue that the notion of libido as a uniform sexual energy has a flattening effect on the phenomena labelled as sexual and, therefore, libidinal.
A sexual economy should then also be conceived of differently: there is no dichotomy between cases where a substitution is made of something definitely sexual for something else which is also definitely sexual, and cases where what is substituted for the sexual is definitely non-sexual. (Freud’s notorious inability to distinguish sublimation clearly from its alternatives would then cease being a problem). The sexual and the non-sexual form a continuum; the question “sexual or non-sexual” can only be answered regarding the ends of this continuum, if at all. However, that is exactly where the question is unlikely to arise.

Below (p. 232ff.) we will see that Freud’s theory of sexuality was constituted through moves that are very similar to those by means of which we have deconstructed his notion of libido.

FORCES TENDING TO LIMIT THE PLASTICITY OF THE LIBIDO.

Up to this point, we have stressed the plasticity and mobility of the libido. This agrees well with Freud’s polemic against “popular opinion”, which ascribes fairly fixed aims and objects to the sexual drive. However, the complementary strand in the Three Essays, which tries to account for the way individuals tend to end up with fairly stable sexual dispositions and in the majority of cases show a certain predilection for heterosexual genital intercourse, should not be neglected. Our description thus far has emphasised that all the major sexual possibilities are present in the polymorphously perverse sexual disposition of the child. In adults, these same possibilities remain present, albeit in a largely unconscious form. However, people are by no means all the same, even if they all partake of these same general possibilities. Quantitative considerations—how strong the forces working for and against each tendency are—determine which possibilities will or will not be realised. Freud regards the sexual structure characterising any individual as stemming from a combination of a default developmental model and deviations from this model because of differences in culture, individual constitution and individual life history. Throughout, Freud seems to assume that the mechanisms governing individual development are those we have already encountered in his metapsychology: the attempt to avoid past unpleasures, and to repeat past pleasures. The metapsychology in the “Project” started off with a richly interconnected network of neurons, that became differentiated when experiences of pleasure and unpleasure led to differential facilitations between them. Similarly, we could say that the network of richly interconnected sexual possibilities embodied in the unconscious becomes differentiated—that is, acquires the specific structure characterising an individual at some point in his development—

It may also have given the misleading impression that before cultural factors intervene, we have here a non-deterministic field of free sexual possibilities. In fact Freud’s model would demand that determinism obtain at every stage of development, so that actions would be understood in terms of the interaction of various forces, where the nature, direction and strength of the various forces involved determine the outcome. “Plastic” does not mean “undetermined”. 
when repeated experiences of pleasure and unpleasure lead to differential facilitations between these possibilities.

However, Freud’s discussion of sexual development largely moves on a more concrete plane. It takes the form of a discussion of the forces limiting the plasticity of the libido, such as

- The pertinacity [Haftbarkeit] and fixation of the libido. Right at the end of the “Summary”, Freud introduces pertinacity “as a provisional psychological concept”. It refers to a tendency for early sexual impressions to become fixated. He presumes that this tendency shows individual variations, and is especially pronounced in later neurotics and perverts.

- The resistances to perverse impulses, i.e., to infantile sexual tendencies that are considered unacceptable. (See p. 240ff, below)

- Most importantly: those resistances tending to shape the individual in such a way that he or she can occupy a determinate slot in a social structure characterised by norms of sexual difference (society tends to presuppose that you are either male or female), heterosexuality, the incommensurability of generations, and determinate family relations that are often mutually exclusive. (The relation of husband and wife is incompatible with that between parent and child or two siblings). Much of this is covered by the prohibition of incest. The individual’s confrontation with this prohibition manifests itself in the form of the Oedipus complex.291 (See p. 244, below)

**FREUD’S 1915 ADDITIONS REGARDING THE LIBIDO.**

The 1915 edition of the *Three Essays*—the year in which the famous papers on metapsychology also appeared—contained significant additions regarding drives and the libido. In these additions Freud tries to regiment what had hitherto been a fairly mobile army of metaphors and exemplars. Given that libido is Freud’s term for the sexual drive [Geschlechtstrieb; unfortunately, but consistently, translated by Strachey as “sexual instinct”], a drive [Trieb; SE: “instinct”] is now “ provisionally” glossed as follows:

> the psychical representative of an endosomatic, continuously flowing source of stimulation, as contrasted with a ‘stimulus’, which is set up by single excitations coming from without. The concept of instinct is thus one of those lying on the frontier of the mental and the physical. [Trieb ist so einer der Begriffe der Abgrenzung des Seelischen vom Körperlichen.] [It] would seem … that in itself an instinct is without quality, and, so far as mental life is concerned, is only to be regarded as a measure of the demand made upon the mind for work. What distinguishes the instincts from one another and endows

---

291 I am aware that my description in this paragraph of what Freud says regarding the sexes, the generations, and family relations in the context of sexuality, is more abstract than those he himself gives on this topic.
them with specific qualities is their relation to their somatic sources and to their aims. The source of an instinct is a process of excitation occurring in an organ and the immediate aim of the instinct lies in the removal of this organic stimulus. (168; GW 67)

The implications of “the removal of [a] stimulus” as aim of the instinct merit discussion, as do some issues concerning the quality of drives.

- **Removal of stimuli as the aim of an instinct**: Essential to sexuality here seems to be the wish to restore the peace in an essentially closed system that has been brought into disequilibrium, and now strives to restore equilibrium. (Below—p. 310ff.—we will see that Bersani finds the *shattering of the subject* the core of Freud’s notion of sexuality). If eroticogen zones are linked to desire, then this is not the desire for the other. However, despite this solipsistic model, most of Freud’s examples—scopophilia, exhibitionism, sadomasochism—are clearly *intersubjective*.

- **As for Freud’s repeated references to a distinctive quality characterising the sexual**: In the “Project”, Q± had featured as a basic principle. In itself, it was entirely without quality. Libido in the *Three Essays* functions in a similar way, but with some interesting shifts. The analogies are various. The sexual field (*Three Essays*) and the psychical apparatus (“Project”) are both presented as differential systems. In the one case libido serves as common currency, ensuring the commensurability of everything in the system; in the other this function is fulfilled by Q±. In both texts pleasure is related to the discharge of tension (libido or Q±), while the increase of tension leads to unpleasure.

- **However, various shifts also occur.** The first shift is that libido is not presented as a unique principle, but as one of two drives—the other apparently related to the “nutritive processes” (217). The second shift is that drives—including libido—are presented as being without quality initially, but subsequently acquiring quality through “their relation to their somatic sources and to their aims”. (168) However, Freud is completely unconvincing when it comes to this second step. Libido therefore never really becomes a *specific* principle, that can be bounded relative to what it is not. When Freud tries to ascribe quality to libido, he sounds like

---

292 In passing, a few features deserve comment:

i) with the notion of a drive—including libido, the sexual drive—Freud again refuses to choose between the mental and the physical;

ii) the activities to which the drive lead, are already made to fall under the category “work”;

iii) the object plays no role in distinguishing drives from each other.

293 Neu’s (1991: 199) following pronouncement is therefore problematic:

Thus the sexual instinct is not to be equated with neutral energy (as in Freud’s earlier theorizing, e.g. in his *Project* …). It has direction (aim and object) as well as a somatic source and impetus (or strength).
Anaximander trying to become Thales in a retrograde historical movement, but not succeeding. The *apeiron* that is supposed to become *water*, remains indeterminate.

Why is Freud so keen to ascribe a “particular quality” to the sexual?

The character of erotogenicity can be attached to some parts of the body in a particularly marked way. There are predestined erotogenic zones … however, … (183)

Any other part of the body can acquire the same susceptibility to stimulation as is possessed by the genitals and can become an erotogenic zone. (184)

Thus the quality of the stimulus has more to do with producing the pleasurable feeling than has the nature of the part of the body concerned. (183)

“Popular opinion” would have no difficulty in ascribing a specific quality to the sexual drive, in accordance with Freud’s formula. Its specific quality is given by its relation to its source—the genitals—and its aim—heterosexual genital intercourse. Even a Freudian widening so that the sources can include genitals, mouth or anus would still work fairly well. But once we hear that any part of the body can function as an erotogenic zone, discover how independent the mental factor in sexuality can be of the body, and discover the bewildering array of possible aims that would still count as sexual, the sexual becomes in need of a specific quality so as to be identifiable as sexual, and distinguishable from the non-sexual. If libido could be provided with a specific quality, Freud’s problem would be solved. However, everything that serves to make the sexual aspecific, ends up also making libido aspecific and without quality. That which was supposed to lend a specific quality to libido turns out to be so aspecific that libido reverts to something without quality—a principle as abstract as Anaximander’s *apeiron* and Freud’s own Q± of 1895.294

This impression is confirmed by all the other passages in which Freud tries to say something regarding the quality of libido.

It seems less certain whether the character of the pleasurable feeling evoked by the stimulus should be described as a ‘specific’ one—a ‘specific’ quality in which the sexual factor would precisely lie. … We may later come upon reasons which seem to support the idea that the pleasurable feeling does in fact possess a specific quality. (183)

A further provisional assumption … is … that excitations of two kinds arise from the somatic organs, based upon differences of a chemical nature. One of these … we describe as being specifically sexual, and we speak of the organ concerned as the ‘erotogenic zone’ of the sexual component instinct arising from it. (168)

Again, the existence of something specifically sexual is assumed, not argued for, and the very notion of an erotogenic zone is parasitic upon this assumption. If sensations in the forehead have

---

294 Because of the mental factor in sexuality we are not even allowed to say that the specificity of the sexual drive in Freud’s widened conception is that it is linked to bodily pleasures.
a sexual meaning to the subject, this meaning can only be grasped from the life history and social/cultural context in which the subject finds himself. Such a contextual truth (or interpretation) cannot be reduced to an atomic fact, viz. that the sensation (or excitation) is in itself a sexual one. The *sensation* is indeterminate apart from the total context. It is not an atomic building block. Its *sexual character* is likewise not an atomic fact, but derives from a whole context. Moreover, there will be countless situations that are neither clearly sexual, nor clearly asexual.

The following passage reintroduces the importance of quantitative factors:

> The setting in motion of [the process of sexual excitation] is first and foremost provided for in a more or less direct fashion by the excitations of the sensory surfaces—the skin and the sense organs—and, most directly of all, by the operation of stimuli on certain areas known as erotogenic zones. The decisive element in these sources of sexual excitation is no doubt the *quality* of the stimuli, though the factor of intensity, in the case of pain, is not a matter of complete indifference. But apart from these sources … in the case of a great number of internal processes sexual excitation arises as a concomitant effect, as soon as the intensity of those processes passes beyond certain quantitative limits. … It may well be that nothing of considerable importance can occur in the organism without contributing some component to the excitation of the sexual instinct. (204-205)

In this passage, going back to the original edition of the *Three Essays*, Freud adheres to the initial, narrower description of erotogenic zones. (They are distinguished from “the skin and sensory surfaces” in general). As such, it is more plausible to link them to a specific *quality* than with the later, broader conception. But in the same passage, after another utterly aspecific reference to their “quality”, sexual stimuli are again linked to the quantitative and the aspecific. No “relation to … somatic sources and to … aims” is specified that would give substance to the specific quality which libido is supposed to have.

Freud describes the contents of the section on “*The libido theory*” as “conceptual scaffolding” [*Hilfsvorstellungen*] meant to help get a grasp on the “psychical manifestations of sexual life”. (217; GW 118)

> We have defined the concept of libido as a quantitatively variable force which could serve as a measure of processes and transformations occurring in the field of sexual excitation. We distinguish this libido in respect of its special origin from the energy which must be supposed to underlie mental processes in general, and we thus attribute a *qualitative* character to it. In thus distinguishing between libidinal and other forms of psychical energy we are giving expression to the presumption that the sexual processes occurring in the organism are distinguished from the nutritive processes by a special chemistry. … [S]exual excitation is derived not from the so-called sexual parts alone, but from all the bodily organs. We thus reach the idea of a quantity of libido, to the mental representation of which we give the name of ‘ego-libido’, and whose production, increase or diminution, …

---

295 Elsewhere (201), Freud also contrasts the erotogenic zones with the skin as a whole.
distribution and displacement should afford us possibilities for explaining the psychosexual phenomena observed. … [W]hen it has become object-libido [, w]e can … perceive it concentrating upon objects, becoming fixed upon them or abandoning them, moving from one object to another and, from these situations, directing the subject’s sexual activity. (217)

Ten years on, Freud therefore reiterates that mental processes involving libido are qualitatively distinct from other mental processes, but is still not able to tell us in what this specific quality consists. Again these remarks are succeeded by others in which he takes the purely quantitative tack. We here have a succinct statement of the view of libido as \textit{libido}, a currency common to all sexual phenomena. Such phenomena are not simply treated as possible substitutes for each other, but rather as manifestations of a single abstract principle.

The upshot of these considerations is again that Freud does not give us any grounds for believing in the existence of a unitary sexual drive or instinct, that would be characterised by a particular quality that distinguishes it from other drives.\textsuperscript{296} Rather, we are motivated in different circumstances to behave in a variety of ways. The various forms of behaviour which Freud regards as sexual indeed show all sorts of interconnections that justify treating them as a cluster. However, given any phenomena of which we are certain that they are not sexual, similar interconnections could be shown with this cluster. Moreover, the differences between the various sexual phenomena are as great as the differences between any of them and what Freud would not regard as sexual. While the \textit{Three Essays} may convince when read (tendentiously) in a Wittgensteinian way, they do not do so on an essentialist reading, which is the reading Freud himself tried to impose on them in his later passages on drives and the libido theory. Freud has not given us any good reasons to regard the heterogeneous cluster of phenomena which he regards as sexual, as manifestations of one single underlying sexual drive, that would be absent in all non-sexual phenomena.

As soon as we make libido central, it becomes plausible to conceive of sexuality as if the other were inessential to it. Once the libido theory is seen to totter, the core of Freud’s account of sexuality comes to lie elsewhere: the ways in which the \textit{concrete} phenomena of sexual life, in all their variety, are connected to each other and to the non-sexual. His phenomenology of sexuality

\textsuperscript{296} A multiplicity of chemical factors is involved in sexual phenomena (even in the narrow sense): various hormones, endorphins and other substances. This in itself militates against the plausibility of quantitative variations in a single factor, libido, being able to account for all sexual phenomena in the way Freud would have liked to. (Although Freud did not intend it as a low level empirical theory, what clearer vindication of his libido theory could there have been than the discovery, at some stage, that all sexual phenomena—in the narrow as well as the broad sense—are ultimately regulated by quantitative variations in some one chemical, or along one physical/chemical dimension?)
shows that it is a predominantly intersubjective phenomenon. The libido theory is part of a wilful attempt on the part of Freud to deny this.

**THE COMPONENT INSTINCTS**

In fact, Freud has two very different ways of talking about the sexual drive. On the one hand, we hear of libido, as one single, overarching sexual drive. On the other hand, we hear of a number of different component drives [Partialtriebe—SE: “component instincts”]. These come in pairs, with an active and a passive pole, e.g. the drive to see and be seen; touch and be touched; inflict and undergo pain. At first sight Freud’s general description of drives as being distinguished from each other by their source and their aim seems to make more sense here, which is only to be expected, as it forms part of (a later insertion into) the section on component instincts. But is the source of scopophilia an excitation in the eye, and its aim the removal of this excitation? And if we must generalise and speak a sensationalist language: do we not in scopophilia, the desire to be touched, and masochism typically long for an increase in excitation, rather than its removal? Moreover, problems of demarcation return: how do we distinguish sexual looking, touching and cruelty from non-sexual looking, touching and cruelty? And even if this posed no problems: why should all these component instincts go on to be part of one drive, manifestations of a single energy, values expressible in a single currency, so that equivalences become transitive? Relations of substitutability are usually not transitive. “Charles Taylor” can be replaced by “Chuck Taylor”, and “Chuck the ball” by “Throw the ball”, but “Charles Taylor” cannot be replaced by “Throw Taylor”.

**THE NATURE OF PLEASURE AND UNPLEASURE**

Even though he admits that “[p]sychology is still so much in the dark in questions of pleasure and unpleasure” (183), Freud’s notion of pleasure and unpleasure is fundamental to his metapsychology. If the psychical apparatus is said to be automatically regulated by feelings of pleasure and unpleasure (probably still Freud’s view at the time of the *Three Essays*), then it is crucial how we conceive of these feelings.

As with Freud’s account of sexuality, we are here faced with two possible strategies for understanding pleasure: in terms of exemplars, or in terms of an explicit, discursive, theoretical model.

Even before consulting Freud’s text, we can expect the exemplary route to run into problems. We are trying to understand sexuality in terms of pleasure (and unpleasure); when we try to get a

---

297 Regarding cruelty, Bersani argues that Freud never really succeeds in distinguishing a sexually charged cruelty (sadism) from non-sexual cruelty. See p. 312, below.
clearer picture of pleasure, it won’t help much to go back to sexual examples, that are likely to be fairly central as exemplars of pleasure!

The problem with Freud’s discursive model of pleasure is that it chimes so badly with the sexual phenomena it is supposed to shed light on. Sexuality is, quite plausibly, said to aim at pleasure, both in the child and in the adult. In childhood,

the separate instincts and erotogenic zones, … independently of one another, … pursued a certain sort of pleasure as their sole sexual aim. … The new sexual aim in men consists in the discharge of the sexual products. The earlier one, the attainment of pleasure, is by no means alien to it; on the contrary, the highest degree of pleasure is attached to this final act of the sexual process. (207)

According to Freud’s model, at puberty “a highly complicated apparatus has been made ready and awaits the moment of being put into operation. This apparatus is to be set in motion by stimuli” (208) which fall into three categories: external, internal and mental. All of these lead to a condition of sexual excitement, of which “a peculiar feeling of tension of an extremely compelling character” (208) is the mental indication [Zeichen; GW 110].298 Note that this apparatus is depicted as being inert in the absence of stimuli—an inertia that seems paradigmatic of pleasure. Activity, or tension, the tendency to activity, thus is already an indication of unpleasure:

a feeling of tension necessarily involves unpleasure. … [A] feeling of this kind is accompanied by an impulse to make a change in the psychological situation, … it operates in an urgent way which is wholly alien to the nature of the feeling of pleasure.

(209)

Before, regarding infantile sexual aims, Freud had already referred to the need for a repetition of satisfaction as expressing itself in “a peculiar feeling of tension, possessing, rather, the character of unpleasure.” (184) However, in trying to define what pleasure in the erotogenic zones is, he here admits, reluctantly, that sexual tension “is also undoubtedly felt as pleasurable.” (209) Reluctantly, because this is at odds with a cornerstone of his metapsychology: the postulate that an increase of tension in the organism is experienced as unpleasurable, while a decrease (or minimally: constancy) of tension is experienced as pleasurable.299 (Note that the metaphors of

298 References to a (“peculiar”) “feeling” or “sensation” of tension keep on recurring in the Three Essays. Cf. for instance 212n & 184.
299 Compare p. 67 and p. 104, above. Despite Freud’s own admission in the Three Essays that sexual pleasure does not seem to fit in with this model, it will be restated without modification in Beyond the Pleasure Principle. (1920g—SE XVIII: 8) As will be Freud’s caveat regarding the nature of pleasure and unpleasure: “This is the most obscure and inaccessible region of the mind”. (1920g—SE XVIII: 7) Bersani (1986: 56) points out that this admission of perplexity does not stop Freud from immediately enumerating exceptions to the pleasure principle in that work!
hunger and itching that we discussed above are of a piece with this model). Sexual pleasure thus does not conform to Freud’s metapsychological model of pleasure as psychic peace (Bersani 1986: 65), and he is left with a problem:

How, then, are this unpleasurable tension and this feeling of pleasure to be reconciled? …

The problem is how it can come about that an experience of pleasure can give rise to a need for greater pleasure. (209-210)

What Freud treats as a problem hardly seems one to me: if I enjoy music, a novel, walking, work I will also want to go on listening, reading, walking or working. To Freud pure pleasure must paradigmatically be passive; only unpleasurable tension can overcome the inertia of the organism in its pleasurable state; the activity that is thus triggered, will have as its aim a return to the passive state. This sounds surprisingly like the death instinct, which Freud later introduces as something “Beyond the pleasure principle”.

Freud’s account of sexual pleasure seems to be guided by the basic needs/satisfaction model he outlined in the “Project” and the Traumdeutung. First there is a need (which in itself is distressing), arising from the interior of the subject’s body. Then there is a satisfying experience that takes away the unpleasant state of need, for which the extraneous help of an external “object” is often needed. The “wish” that is left behind by this experience, is a desire for a repetition of the satisfying experience. This model saddles Freud with various prejudices; among them a biologically biased need/satisfaction model, with the concomitant idea that need is in itself an unpleasant state. He thus finds it difficult to accommodate desires that are in themselves pleasurable, and pleasures that do not (or need not) take the form of satisfaction, that is: experiences that lead to an extinction of the desire for them.

Freud’s gloss on the term Lust speaks volumes about his notion of pleasure. He treats the word Lust as being ambiguous between two things: the feeling of sexual tension, and the feeling of satisfaction. (212n) This prejudges the whole issue; that extensive field of pleasure that would
fall under the term *Lust*, but is not correctly described as either “tension” or “satisfaction” is immediately excluded.\(^{301}\) Examples are those situations where a pleasure is experienced that *neither* asks for anything (except perhaps for its own continuation, but not even necessarily that), so that describing it in terms of a “tension” seems inappropriate, *nor* is sated, so that its continuation would be unpleasurable.\(^{302}\) Another field of phenomena is also excluded: situations that those concerned experience as pleasurable *exactly because* they typically involve

- *some* tension\(^{303}\) (chess, attempting to seduce somebody new instead of sticking to the safe pleasures of an existing relationship, all the pleasures related to something being challenging or arousing our curiosity\(^{304}\) or even

- *a great deal of* tension (the joys of alpinism, car racing, parachuting, sailing around Cape Horn, an affair with one of the Sultan’s wives, obsessive love affairs generally, and everything else to which words like “excitement” and “adventure” are applied in a positive sense, especially where “unnecessary” risks are involved).

Freud seems to forget phenomena of this sort; he tends to talk as if tension or excitement is something we never have *too little* of. He for instance opposes the hypothesis of a “craving for stimulation” \([\textit{Reizhunger}]\) put forward by Hoche and Bloch. (151n1; GW 50n2)\(^{305}\)

---

\(^{301}\) “Satisfaction” translates Freud’s German term, \textit{Befriedigung} —etymologically: “being made peaceful” — which carries with it a rather different cluster of connotations, linked to the way it is ultimately constructed from a verb related to the noun \textit{Friede}, peace.

\(^{302}\) Perhaps a core ingredient of an \textit{ars amandi} is the cultivation of such sexual pleasures, which neither adhere to the short-lived climax, nor are impatient to get to the climax. But in Freud’s own terms such pleasures would be linked to the danger of dwelling too long on acts that \textit{de jure} should be preparatory acts for the sexual act \textit{proper} — in other words, the danger of perversion.

\(^{303}\) Or: increase in tension.

\(^{304}\) The progressive concealment of the body which goes along with civilization keeps sexual curiosity awake. This curiosity seeks to complete the sexual object by revealing its hidden parts. (156)

\(^{305}\) We must bear in mind that Freud was not simply “a good bourgeois”, but wrote in a time predating social security and effective treatments of tuberculosis, syphilis, etc.; a time and place where anti-Semitism, deaths during childbirth, infant deaths and so on made everyday life a much riskier business than today.

---

\footnote{\textit{Footnote ctd. on next page—}}
In many cases, sexual tension will be pleasurable, provided the risk of unfulfilment is found acceptable or pleasurable. (For some people, any risk will be unpleasurable; for others, there can hardly be any pleasure without risk). In other cases, sexual tension will be pleasurable where there is an expectation of fulfilment (however unrealistic). We could even say that the more confident the expectation of fulfilment, the less felicitous the term “tension” will tend to be. The receptivity of the moist vagina may in such cases be a better metaphor for the mental state of both sexes than the tension of the erect penis.

The notion of “tension” can be read as an attempt to find a lowest common denominator for the whole variety of mental states found in sexual desire, arousal, excitement or expectation. These mental states will typically be intentional: directed to the situation, to the other person as “object”, and to the future. The term “tension” misses out on this. It again sounds as if it derives from sensationalist language: the “peculiar” sensation that is present in all instances of sexual desire, which exactly because of its presence become instances of sexual desire. Here a Wittgensteinian remark may be needed: where we are convinced that a sensation must be very “peculiar” to do a particular job, this probably indicates that the job we have in mind cannot be done by a sensation at all. (Cf. Wittgenstein 1968: §196)

Freud has taken a particular interpretation of male arousal and ejaculation as paradigmatic of sexuality in general. He assumes that there is something like full presence in ejaculatory pleasure. Previously this pleasure was deferred, now it is fully present. (‘Satisfaction’) Against this we can object, drawing on phenomenology, that it will necessarily contain protensions and retentions.306 The male orgasm (typically) leads to a sudden and fairly complete extinction of a desire for the continuation of the pleasure issuing in it. (210) But it may be a fairly atypical pleasure, even among the sexual pleasures. Because Freud makes the male orgasm the paradigmatic pleasure, he must resist what he himself admits to be the “most obvious explanation”307, namely that “this tension arises in some way out of the pleasure itself”. (212) Here what goes for one pleasure—the highest one—must go for all; just two pages earlier, however, Freud had seemed to admit that different pleasures can follow very different patterns. This is when he says of “end-pleasure” that it differs from “pleasure due to the excitation of erotogenic zones … ‘fore-pleasure’”: “It is brought about entirely by discharge: it is wholly a pleasure of satisfaction and with it the tension of the libido is for the time being extinguished.” Fore-pleasure is a continuation of infantile sexuality, whereas end-pleasure is “something new”. (210) Freud’s argument thus contains a decidedly odd rhetorical figure: what is taken as the paradigmatic sexual pleasure, is

The wish to decrease risk and tension may have been more urgent then than in the post-industrial societies of today.

306 Cf. p. 289: What prevents full sexual satisfaction: civilisation, or something intrinsic to sexuality itself?
307 For those not committed to Freud’s model of pleasure? He goes on to call this most obvious explanation “extremely improbable in itself”. (212)
simultaneously recognised to be an exception in the whole field for which it is supposed to be paradigmatic.  

Freud does not discuss the female orgasm, which is not typically linked to the extinction of desire in the same way. The implicit suggestion is that it follows the male model.

Freud relates fore-pleasure and end-pleasure to each other teleologically:

The new function of the erotogenic zones [is] therefore: they are used to make possible, through the medium of the fore-pleasure which can be derived from them (as it was during infantile life), the production of the greater pleasure of satisfaction. [Befriedigungslust] (211; GW 112)

This teleological structure brings with it a danger: that of perversion, in which the fore-pleasure takes the place of the end-pleasure. (211)

Characteristically, Freud returns to a view of these various pleasures as continuous, whereas the rest of his argument had tended to put the stress on the discontinuities between them. He does this by conceding that there is already tension in infantile sexuality, the sexuality of the erotogenic zones. Before, Freud reluctantly conceded that excitement (“tension”) and pleasure were compatible; now even excitement and satisfaction are treated as compatible:

We can now understand why, in discussing the sources of sexuality, we were equally justified in saying of a given process that it was sexually satisfying or sexually exciting. (212)

Freud however fails to draw the conclusion that pleasures involving both tension/excitation and satisfaction/Befriedigung may be more typical than (or, if need be, as typical as) the male orgasm or overeating. The term Lust generally does not have just one of the two, supposedly exclusive, meanings Freud ascribes to it, but both; each of the two poles thus acquires connotations different from those it had in the exclusive view.

If we have dealt at some length with this fairly abstract issue, it is also because of its bearing on our topic. (For the sake of argument, I have followed Freud’s dubious use of the word Befriedigung [satisfaction], where Lust [pleasure] would have been more appropriate). The

308 Something similar happens in Freud’s remarks on beauty (made as an aside while discussing fetishism). The beautiful originally was that which was ‘sexually stimulating’. However, that which is most sexually stimulating—the genitals—is “never” regarded as “really ‘beautiful’”. (156n2)

309 Freud accuses Krafft-Ebing of something similar. His theory, having been designed to account for the sexual activity of adult males, … takes too little account of … the conditions in children, in females and in castrated males. (214)

310 Similarly, regarding “the production of sexual excitation [in children] by rhythmic mechanical agitation of the body”, Freud had claimed “that in this connection the concepts of ‘sexual excitation’ and ‘satisfaction’ can to a great extent be used without distinction”. (201)
pleasures of human interaction—even those of sex—do not usually conform to Freud’s model of pleasure as satisfaction or Befriedigung. A recurrent theme in the discourse of alterity is that the desire (or need) for satisfaction or Befriedigung is not a desire for the other as other. Words like ‘adventure’, ‘excitement’, etc., may be more fitting for the relation with the other qua other—that is characterised by desire rather than need—than a word like ‘satisfaction’ or ‘Befriedigung’.

Perhaps the notion of sexual tension should be related to that of (perceived) risk or danger. The more one abhors risk, the unpredictable, the unknown, the less a relation with the other will be desired. Only if we put a certain premium on adventure rather than the guaranteed removal of tension and predictable satisfactions can we desire the other. Freud’s model seems to exclude the possibility of such a desire for the other. It does, however, have the virtue of according due weight to people’s desire for satisfaction, rather than the adventure of the other. It is unlikely that many (or perhaps any?) people can be found whose desire for the sexual adventure of the other completely eclipses their desire for satisfaction.

MASOCHISM, PLEASURE, AND UNPLEASURE

The phenomenon of masochism—a pleasure in unpleasure (pain or humiliation)—clearly puts the pleasure/unpleasure dualism on which the whole of Freud’s metapsychology has depended, under strain. Freud even mentions (without comment) the view that “every pain contains in itself the possibility of a feeling of pleasure”, (159) which would make of masochism just the realisation of an essential possibility already contained in pain itself.

Freud’s use of the notions of pleasure and unpleasure can be questioned in yet another way. In the “Project” the ultimate explanatory level was situated at the level of the facilitations between neurones. Here everything has become commensurable; everything must ultimately translate to differential facilitations between neurones. We saw no reason to problematise this lowest level notion of “differential facilitation”.

However, in the Three Essays pleasure and unpleasure function as ultimate explanatory level, so that Freud’s theory becomes a species of psychological hedonism. We would thus have hoped that they be at least as unambiguous as facilitations were in the Project’s model of the psychical apparatus. However, they remain at least as problematic as that which they are supposed to explain: why people show the sexual behaviour that they do, especially where this deviates strongly from what would usually be regarded as pleasurable. In common parlance, saying that something is done “for pleasure” is usually a way of distinguishing one sort of motive from other motives (“for business purposes”, “out of duty”, “for payment”, or whatever). If everything is

---

311 It behoves unadventurous souls not to write such heroic words.

312 Freud deserves credit because he already himself demonstrates much of what makes these two concepts that are already so important in folk psychology questionable.
however said to be done “for pleasure” (or “to avoid unpleasure”), then a decisive shift takes place relative to such a language game. In some cases one could say that the notion of pleasure thereby becomes void of all meaning. Such a charge would not be justified apropos of Freud. All behaviour obeys the pleasure principle, directly or indirectly. The reality principle is in the end just a deferred way of obeying the pleasure principle. And even where behaviour does not (seem to) obey the reality principle, Freud teaches us to look for ways in which it nevertheless serves to give pleasure, often in some symbolic or other devious way: oral pleasure, anal pleasure, the pleasures of self-punishment and other masochistic pleasures, etc. The question then becomes: “What sort of pleasure is involved in this phantasy or behaviour, and how does it give that pleasure?”

**BLURRING THE BOUNDARY BETWEEN NORMALITY AND ABNORMALITY: FREUD’S DISCUSSION OF THE PERVERSIONS IN PART ONE OF THE THREE ESSAYS**

**INTRODUCTION**

A rigorously psychoanalytic logic … breaks down the boundaries separating concepts.

(Bersani 1986: 21)

In the real world, transitions and intermediate stages are far more common than sharply differentiated [gesonderten—separated] opposite states. (1937c—SE XXIII: 228; GW 16: 72)

Current discussions of othering often make much of the structural similarities in the way different groups are marginalised and devalued. What Freud says in the Three Essays mainly de-others some of the groups who typically tend to be among the prime victims of othering: homosexuals and other sexual minorities (“perverts”), neurotics, children displaying sexual activities, the mentally ill. Freud treats them as members of one humanity, sharing the same basic (sexual) dispositions, with differences between them tending to be no more than quantitative ones. Those who are dubbed “abnormal” form a vast group, connected via an unbroken chain to those we call normal. There is no discrete group of “others”, not partaking in the same universal human essence as the rest of us, whose separate, depraved nature could be cited as a justification for denying them the rights other citizens have, expelling them from society, or destroying them. Even today, Freud’s lapses into othering in the Three Essays do not loom large, compared to the insistency with which he normally avoids it. When we need to criticise him on this score, we can usually do so with tools derived from his work and the tradition he fostered.

From the point of view of an ideal non-othering discourse, the Three Essays can be seen as objectionable. We must however avoid anachronism. For those who wish to combat othering, the question: “To what extent does Freud other others?”, should be supplemented by a second one: “Did Freud manage to reduce othering?” All thought is historically embedded. No thinker can free herself in any radical sense from the set of notions (whether conceived of as Zeitgeist,
epistéme, or whatever) in which she operates. As for the *Three Essays*, we can say that Freud’s compulsion to identify certain phenomena as perversions reflects the stocks in trade of late XIXth Century sexology (Davidson 1987a), whereas his reluctance to invoke the notion of degeneracy, his repeated assertion that perversion is completely compatible with full mental health in all other respects, his emphasis on the cultural relativity of notions of sexual normality and abnormality, etc. clearly represent an advance relative to the consensus of sexologists in his time. A deconstructive approach à la Bersani (1986) would say that Freud’s texts are at their most psychoanalytic and most valuable exactly at moments of theoretical breakdown. In the present context we could then say that Freud’s floundering when he tries to construct an adequate theoretical discourse on the perversions is the result of his dawning awareness that such a discourse is not sustainable—as awareness dawns, a return of the repressed anomalies of the discourse of perversion occurs. (Obviously, we could also be far less favourable in our assessment of the meaning of this theoretical failure in Freud).

Freud’s discussion of each perversion tends to conform to roughly the following scheme: After having identified the sexual behaviour in question,

1) He advances arguments to show that it is much closer to the sexual behaviour of those we consider normal than we could at first think.

2) Nevertheless, Freud usually next takes an opposite tack, and attempts to indicate where a boundary between the perversion in question and normality should be drawn.

3) The resistances against the perverse tendency in question are discussed. Normality is not achieved because of the absence of the tendencies that perverts translate into action, but through the action of countervailing forces—“resistances” or “dams” that oppose the perverse tendencies—and even then only when these countervailing forces are sufficiently strong, compared to the “perverse” tendencies.313

We next investigate the sorts of pronouncements that Freud makes about the perversions under these headings.

1) Arguments that blur the boundary between perversion and normality

[It is] inappropriate to use the word perversion as a term of reproach. [Especially] In the sphere of sexual life we are brought up against peculiar and, indeed, [currently] insoluble difficulties as soon as we try to draw a sharp line to distinguish mere variations within the range of what is physiological [i.e.: normal—AG] from pathological symptoms. (160-161)314

313 As a fourth step, we could mention the following: some perversions are grouped in pairs, with an active and a passive member. Where this is the case, Freud goes into the significance of the active/passive polarity for the phenomenon in question.

314 Italicised words in brackets are my translation of words Strachey ignores in his: “Gerade auf dem Gebiete des Sexuallebens”, and “derzeit”. (GW 60)
Even in the most normal sexual process we may detect rudiments which, if they had developed, would have led to the deviations described as “perversions”. (149)

The disposition to perversions of every kind is a general and fundamental human characteristic. (191; CF also 231)

There is a continuum connecting clear cases of “perversion” and clear cases of “normality”, health and pathology.\(^{315}\) In this phase of Freud’s argument he thus underlines the continuity, the lack of boundaries, between the normal and the abnormal. He often uses the occasion to show the culturally variable, and often extremely arbitrary nature of what is designated as normal. Freud also repeatedly emphasises that “abnormality” in one feature is fully compatible with “normality” (or even superiority) in other fields, and that complete normality is so exceptional as to be non-existent.\(^{316}\)

Freud’s most emphatic statement in this regard is probably the following, concerning homosexuality:

> Psycho-analytic research is most decidedly opposed to any attempt at separating off homosexuals from the rest of mankind as a group of a special character. (145n)\(^{317}\)

To other a group is exactly, and essentially, to “separate it off from the rest of [hu]mankind as a group of a special character.” In othering we passionately embrace (and foster) the belief that there is a vast empty space safely separating us from the other, so that there is not the slightest risk of our being tainted with otherness. Freud’s emphasis on the continuity between perversion and normality, neurosis and normality, sanity and madness, the adult and the infantile, is probably

---

\(^{315}\) Neurosis and normality are likewise treated as continuous:

> An unbroken chain bridges the gap between the neuroses in all their manifestations and normality. “[W]e are all to some extent hysterics.” [T]he disposition to perversions … must form part of what passes as a normal constitution. (171)

\(^{316}\) At the beginning of Part III we read:

> A normal sexual life is only assured by an exact convergence of the affectionate current and the sensual current both being directed towards the sexual object and the sexual aim. … It is like the completion of a tunnel which has been driven through a hill from both directions. (207)

In the course of the Three Essays, the dichotomy normal/abnormal is further undermined by reversing the hierarchy it usually represents in certain ways: abnormality precedes normality; the normal is to be understood in terms of the abnormal (sexuality in general is to be understood in terms of the perversions; adult sexuality in terms of infantile sexuality), and not vice versa. Freud is ambiguous as to where the essence of sexuality lies: in its goal (normality) or in its origin (infantile sexuality). Cf. footnote 370, below.

\(^{317}\) Similarly, Freud will refuse any further pigeon-holing within the category “homosexuals”:

> Nevertheless, though the distinctions cannot be disputed, it is impossible to overlook the existence of numerous intermediate examples of every type, so that we are driven to conclude that we are dealing with a connected series. (138)
one of the prime reasons why people tend to retreat in shock and horror from his ideas. The more one absorbs of psychoanalysis, the harder it becomes to employ strategies of othering innocently. (Psychoanalysis as theory and practice will certainly not stop us from othering. However, it impedes othering by making it harder for us to remain unaware of what we are doing when we other. After psychoanalysis, othering will never be the same again). Note that Freud’s denial of categorical distinctness is not a denial of difference.

Homosexuality and heterosexuality may not be treated as an “either/or”. As Freud puts it in a 1915 footnote:

All human beings are capable of making a homosexual object-choice and have in fact made one in their unconscious. Indeed, libidinal attachments to persons of the same sex play no less a part as factors in mental life, and a greater part as a motive force for illness, than do similar attachments to the opposite sex. (145n)

A choice of an object independently of its sex … is the original basis from which, as a result of restriction in one direction or the other, both the normal and the inverted types develop. (145n-146n)

Freud accepts a two-fold classification for perversions linked to deviations in the sexual aim. They represent either anatomical extensions “beyond the regions of the body that are designed for sexual union”, or a lingering on preliminaries to sexual union. (150) Both terms accentuate the continuity between the normal and the abnormal.

Quantitative and temporal factors determine whether normality or abnormality will occur, rather than a priori differences of essence.

The differences separating the normal from the abnormal can lie only in the relative strength of the individual components of the sexual instinct and in the use to which they are put in the course of development. (205n)

The childhood of later neurotics generally does “not differ essentially” from those who turn out ‘normal’, “but only in the intensity and clarity of the phenomena involved.” (176n2) In the process of sexual development minute variations in sequence and duration can lead to quite different outcomes. (241) Chaos theory has today turned this way of thinking about complex processes into a commonplace. However, its challenge to essentialism—including a belief in the chasm necessarily separating the Self from the essence of the Other—is still hardly acknowledged.

[318] In a discussion of paedophilia, Freud having denied any intrinsic link between perversions and mental illness, tells us that the sexual disturbances of the mentally ill are also found among the healthy and in whole races or occupations. The insane merely exhibit such aberration to an intensified degree; or … it may become exclusive and replace normal sexual satisfaction entirely. (148)
Freud’s theory of infantile sexuality on the one hand greatly increases the continuity between adults and children: sexuality is not limited to adults, but found in both. On the other hand, it gives priority to the discontinuity between them: the form sexuality takes in children does not correspond with the form that popular opinion (and Freud himself, in his less vigilant moments) takes to be paradigmatic of sexuality. Freud introduces a different type of continuity by stressing the continuities between infantile sexuality, adult perversions, and neurosis, all of which are represented in the unconscious of even the most normal adult.

In othering, “abnormalities” are often treated as a monstrous exception that must be expelled from the subject or from humanity to preserve health. Like his emphasis on the continuity between normality and abnormality, Freud’s repeated emphasis on how large the group of “neurotics” and “perverts” is, acts against such tendencies to other them.

2) Freud introduces boundaries. Criteria for distinguishing between normality and abnormality, or between health and pathology

As a second step, Freud typically introduces boundaries—a qualitative break—into that which he had previously portrayed as a continuum containing only quantitative differences. (Sometimes the boundary Freud tries to draw is that between perversion and normality, with perversion in itself not necessarily being regarded as pathological; and sometimes between health and pathology, as in the above quote.)

Fetishism is linked to normality via the “psychologically essential overvaluation of the sexual object, which inevitably extends to everything that is associated with it.” (154) There is a continuum running from treasuring your beloved’s kerchief to full-blown fetishism.319

Fetishes can be part of normal sexuality; only when sexual activity becomes entirely focused on the fetish itself, to the exclusion of other aims and human objects, should one speak of fetishism. Pathology only sets in

---

319 The field of intermediate cases is potentially vast. Almost any specification of qualities you demand of a love object, beyond those simply prescribed by “normality”, can qualify as fetishistic (if not yet perverse). Think of demands regarding: beauty, cleanliness (an extremely elastic notion), slenderness (or plumpness), race, nationality, religion, age range—and even gender. (If demanding high heels of one’s sexual partner is fetishistic, why isn’t it fetishistic to demand that the partner be of a particular gender?) Freud’s formulated criteria here again apparently do not cover the judgements he would have had about particular cases.
when the longing for the fetish passes beyond the point of being merely a necessary condition attached to the sexual object and actually takes the place of the normal aim, and, further, when the fetish becomes detached from a particular individual and becomes the sole sexual object. These are, indeed, the general conditions under which mere variations of the sexual instinct pass over into pathological aberrations. (154)

Similarly,

lingering over the stage of touching can scarcely be counted as a perversion, provided that in the long run the sexual act is carried further. [falls der Sexualakt überhaupt nur weitergeht] (156; GW 55)

Voyeurism and sadism are approached in a similar way: first the continuity with the normal is emphasised, and then Freud tries to determine at what point the bounds of the normal have been exceeded. Even the strangest of these “new sexual aims that can take the place of the normal one” on closer inspection turn out to be “already hinted at in the normal sexual process.” (156) Voyeurism is prefigured in the pleasures attached to the sense of sight in normal sexuality, while sadism is linked to normality because the “sexuality of most male human beings contains an element of aggressiveness—a desire to subjugate.” (157)

The pleasure in looking becomes a perversion if it is exclusively fixated on the genitals, is linked to the overriding of disgust, or supplants the normal sexual aim, instead of being a preparation for it, while sadism would correspond to an aggressive component of the sexual instinct which has become independent and exaggerated and, by displacement, has usurped the leading position. (158)

Having given specific criteria for separating particular cases of pathological perversion from their non-pathological counterparts in the broad spectrum of sexual behaviour that may be regarded as normal, Freud in the end attempts to furnish general criteria stipulating when perversions should be regarded as pathological:

---

320 One could read this passage in two ways. According to one reading, Freud is not labelling fetishism as pathological; he is only talking about further conditions to be met before it does become pathological. According to a second reading, which I myself follow, the term “fetishism” should be used only to name a form of pathology; Freud’s criteria for pathology are therefore simultaneously criteria for fetishism. Freud himself remarks that he only discusses fetishism in the section concerning deviations of sexual aim for expository reasons; by rights it belongs with the other deviations of the sexual object. If we find Freud bigoted because he does not regard a fixation on a fetish, to the exclusion of the human object, as just one variant of human sexuality, a variant which is not more or less problematic (or valuable) than any other, consistency would demand that we also see something like autism as simply one variant of human existence. However, if we agree that fetishism, in Freud’s narrow sense, is a fairly deficient or impoverished way of (not) relating to others, this does not mean that we have to conceptualise it as “pathological” or “ perverse”.
If a perversion, instead of appearing merely alongside the normal sexual aim and object, and only when circumstances are unfavourable to them and favourable to it—if, instead of this, it ousts them completely and takes their place in all circumstances—if, in short, a perversion has the characteristics of exclusiveness and fixation—then we shall usually be justified in regarding it as a pathological symptom. (161)

Freud characteristically refrains from being categorical even here: “we shall usually be justified in regarding …”. However, this general criterion is incompatible with Freud’s own sustained resistance, through most of the preceding pages of the text, to a pathologisation of perversions, even where they are exclusive (exclusive homosexuality; apparently also an exclusive preference for oral or anal sex).321 What is more, as Arnold Davidson points out, we could ask whether, according to the logic of Freud’s own argument, an exclusive focus on genital sex (or, for that matter, an exclusive preference for the opposite sex) should itself not be considered pathological.

But it is clear enough that the tendency toward exclusiveness and fixation on genital activity is not only non-pathological but a central component of Freud’s conception of normal, healthy sexuality. (Davidson 1987a: 272)

3) Perversions, suffering and autonomy

What is missing in Freud’s account of the perversions (and in those criticising him in the name of a culturalist, relativist, everything-goes view of sexual variations) is any attention to the unfulfilment, suffering or harm involved in perversion, on the part of its subject or object. The criteria that he does give to determine whether something is perverse or not, pathological or not (it is not clear to what extent these criteria do overlap), then seem to lack a rationale. (As Neu (1991) would argue).

In later psychoanalytic literature this suffering or lack of fulfilment does often come out. According to Welldon (1988: 8), for instance, the male pervert322 does not understand what is driving him:

Usually he does not understand what ‘is taking him over’ or why he does ‘those things’ which actually provide him with no pleasure beyond a short-lived feeling of well-being, though that lasts long enough for him to experience a sense of relief from his mounting anxiety. … He is only too painfully aware of the compulsion to repeat the action, but he is quite oblivious of the hostility that causes it.

321 When it comes to exclusive fetishism, Freud makes an exception (or fails to be consistent): exclusive fetishism is pathological.
322 Welldon claims that the perversions described by Freud are essentially male phenomena; to her the female equivalent of (male) perversion is the woman who abuses her children (in any of a number of different ways).
Stroeken’s (1994: 109) description of perversion is similarly bleak. He implicitly describes perversions as being at odds with the subject’s autonomy. They are ritualised, compulsive practices—things can and may only proceed in this one way. [They] therefore by no means involve a greater degree of freedom than the ordinary forms of sexuality. It is not a matter of somebody occasionally doing something way-out while making love.

But perhaps Freud implicitly does supply a rationale for identifying perversions, and finding them less than optimal as forms of human behaviour and experience. We can read between the lines that he takes them to be inimical to the subject’s autonomy. To explain this reading of Freud, let me again refer to Hans Achterhuis’s (1980) critique of Dutch welfare work, which I discussed in the Introduction.

I was intrigued to discover how closely the distinguishing features Freud ascribes to perversions or pathology in the passages cited above correspond, at a very abstract level, to the features characterising the Other in Achterhuis’s book. The general pattern found in it is the following: $x$ is still OK as long as it is subordinate to the Self, does not become something independent of the Self, does not usurp its place, and leaves its boundless autonomy intact. If $x$ in any way stops complying with these conditions, it qualifies as an Other, that must be done away with. The birthright of the Self, needing no further justification, is to be and do everything that in the Other counts as a mortal sin: to occupy the divine or regal throne of autonomy, to be in the dominant position and to be independent while not being threatened by the independence of anyone or anything else.

Applying this model to Freud’s Three Essays, we can say: for something to become a perversion (or pathological, depending on the context), is for it to become Other in this sense. (The ego, especially as it is later worked out in Freud’s structural model, will then show remarkable parallels with the Self in Achterhuis’s scheme).

The main difference in the way Freud and Achterhuis approach the Other is the following: Freud is far from proclaiming an all-out war on perversions. Achterhuis will only tolerate that which has the status of non-Other. Freud knows that we will have to find a modus vivendi with what is Other; a radical escape from Otherness is not possible. Autonomy is at most an ideal; the subject’s autonomy is severely constrained simply by the nature of reality, of subjectivity, and of sociality. Otherness is often a nuisance, but it need not be that, or only that. Achterhuis secures the harmony of the Self (the subject, society, etc., before infection by the Other occurs) by describing it in terms from which every suggestion of plurality is absent. For Freud, on the other hand, the subject and society are characterised by plurality and conflict from scratch. Perversion and neurosis are endemic in human reality, and the unconscious even more so.

Perhaps we should then say that Freud has problems with perversions not because of some narrow-minded prejudice, but only inasmuch as they are inimical to the ideal of autonomy. Where
he is inconsistent, is in not applying his criteria consistently: an exclusive focus on adult heterosexual coitus can be as narrow, as inimical to autonomy, that is: as regrettable as any perversion, according to the same criteria Freud has formulated for perversion or pathology.

In de-othering ‘perversion’, Freud in effect grants the recalcitrant members of the parliament of instincts certain rights, a sort of personhood, a recognition of their demand to speak, to be heard and to be respected; parallel to the way processes of political liberation have striven to obtain full personhood and citizenship for the formerly subaltern—slaves, women, and the colonised. (Both Freud’s theory and his practice could be said to be aimed at this end; to criticise Freud in the light of such considerations is to hoist him with his own petard). In general citizens, however much of a nuisance, must be granted a certain leeway to make themselves heard.

4) Resistances to perverse tendencies

For each perversion, Freud discusses the specific resistances that oppose it so as to secure normality.

Among the forces restricting the direction taken by the sexual instinct we laid emphasis upon shame, disgust, pity and the structures of morality and authority erected by society.

(231)³²³

In addition, Freud mentions pain (159, in connection with masochism), horror (161, in connection with necrophilia) and “aesthetic ideals” (177) as “resisting forces” against perverse impulses.³²⁴ (In one formulation, the resistances are forces standing “in opposition and resistance to the libido” (159—my emphasis), instead of the usual “perverse impulses”). As the “hostile relation to [the] own sex” is said to be a decisive influence working against a homosexual object-choice (230), it can also be counted among the forces resisting perversion.

The aim here is to show that what is manifestly “present” in abnormality is not utterly “absent” in normality. (Later Freud will in effect argue that it was there in the infantile stage, and if it is now not consciously acted upon, it is still active in the unconscious). Normality is achieved only through active countermeasures against tendencies to abnormal acts.

³²³ Pity works against sadistic impulses. Many of the other forces inhibiting perversion cannot be so clearly linked to specific impulses. For instance, oral sex can be regarded with disgust, condemned as immoral, be forbidden by those with authority, found unaesthetic, and be avoided (despite the inclination to engage in it), so as to forestall shame before the eyes of society. (Freud specifically mentions shame as a force opposing scopophilia and exhibitionism (157), but this need not be meant in an exclusive sense).

³²⁴ In this context, Freud also uses other metaphors: barriers and dams: the “barrier against incest” (225); “the mental forces which … impede the course of the sexual instinct and, like dams, restrict its flow”. (177) In contrast with the metaphors of dams or barriers, with their suggestion of inert boundaries, the term “forces” suggests that normality is maintained only through continuous vigilance, exertion, and expenditure of energy.
Inasmuch as he shows the conventional nature of the boundary separating what is found disgusting from what is not, Freud undermines the othering of those who indulge in ‘disgusting’ sexual practices. They are not really doing anything unnatural (or counternatural), but something that can only be found disgusting according to some culturally given norm. Here Freud’s approach to perversion is in line with what he says about inversion: that thanks to the work of Bloch, “[t]he pathological approach to the study of inversion has been displaced by the anthropological.” (139n) Of course, it is by now a commonplace in the study of othering that presenting cultural (or even individual) norms as timeless facts of nature is an ideal way to get them accepted without questioning. Re-asserting their cultural status is then a counterstrategy designed to make us examine them critically.

Regarding cunnilingus and fellatio as “perversions”, Freud tells us that while lip-to-lip kissing and lip-to-genital kissing are valued totally differently by his contemporaries, the former being seen as innocent, and the latter as disgusting, and thus perverse, there is in fact very little objective reason for such a difference in evaluation. “The limits of such disgust are … often purely conventional: a man who will kiss a pretty girl’s lips passionately, may perhaps be disgusted at the idea of using her toothbrush”, without having any reason to think his mouth is cleaner than hers. (151-152)

Similarly, Freud rejects the idea that disgust at anal intercourse is “objectively” justified by the fact that this involves a contact with excrement—that which is disgusting par excellence.325 The

325 This phrase: [das] Ekelhafte[…] an sich (GW 51), blandly translated in the SE as “a thing which is disgusting in itself” (152) is most interesting for our topic. If the genitals are the paradigm for the sexual, then excrement is the paradigm for that which is disgusting. The (negative) other is perhaps above all: the unclean. And nothing is uncleaner than shit. This seems to be a trans-cultural constant. Thus in all the languages I have any command of, one can abuse somebody by hurling excremental or anal language at him—for instance, calling him “a piece of shit” or an “asshole”. To hurl such language can be the equivalent of hurling shit.

However the Dutch, whose national character tends to the anal, also use excremental terms in other ways: “Wat een drolletje!” [“What a little turd!”], said of an infant, can be an expression of endearment. Perhaps this expression should occasion no surprise on the part of those who are psychoanalytically schooled. In the first place, the infant holds that children are born through the bowels (as does the adult unconscious). In the second place, if, to the female a child has the meaning of “gift”, and to the unconscious faeces have the same meaning, it is no wonder that some language should in this ‘literal’ way equate the child and excrement.

A second linguistic point perhaps needs to be taken into account: the role of the diminutive in turning an otherwise denigrating term into a term of endearment; something similar happens in Afrikaans when racist Whites call their beloved offspring “meidjie” [little nigger maid] or “kaffertjie” [little nigger]. It is interesting that genital terms can have a similar abusive function: why is it not a compliment to call somebody a “prick” or “cunt”? Freud’s pronouncements on this score are contradictory: on the one hand, he treats it as logical that the genitals should be overvalued, and a problem that this overvaluation only
hysteric could with as much justification object to heterosexual genital intercourse because the penis is also used for urination. (152)

It is telling that Freud does not, following the usual pattern in the *Three Essays*, give any indication of a point at which oral and anal sex become perverse.326

Despite this emphasis on the conventional nature of the resistances, Freud characteristically refuses to come down squarely on the “culture” side of the culture/nature divide:

> One gets an impression from civilized children that the construction of these dams is a product of education, and no doubt education has much to do with it. But in reality this development is organically determined and fixed by heredity, and it can occasionally occur without any help at all from education. Education will not be trespassing beyond its appropriate domain if it limits itself to following the lines which have already been laid down organically and to impressing them somewhat more clearly and deeply. (177-178)327

This is not plausible. It is not plausible that, in general, education could just follow lines already laid down by nature.328 (Nor would it chime with Freud’s previous insistence on the purely conventional nature of (at least: many of) the resistances, and his reference, one page on, to their goal as being an “educational ideal” (179)). I can accept, with Freud, that sexuality probably involves an interaction between conventional schemata supplied by culture and an evolutionary schema of development (it would be strange if the result of human development did not usually include definite tendencies to reproductive behaviour). However, each of the two codetermining factors in itself probably radically underdetermines sexual behaviour. Furthermore, apart from the plausibility or not of any specific claims Freud makes about the role of each of the two factors, there is the general problem that the two types of discourse tend to be incommensurable: in

---

326 Does Freud perhaps find the analogy between anus and vagina, or between mouth and genitals, sufficient to make oral and anal sex variants of normal sexual behaviour rather than forms of perversion or pathology? When Freud discusses fetishism, for instance, we hear that in this case what is used for sexual purposes is not really “appropriate” to this use. (Cf. notes 262 and 348).

327 Freud makes similar remarks elsewhere in the *Three Essays*, in which his residual Lamarckism makes itself felt: “the barrier against incest … has no doubt already become established in many persons by organic inheritance.” (225n3).

328 Not plausible in general, but in some cases a close parallel between cultural norms and inborn tendencies is imaginable, for instance in avoiding faeces. (Animals generally do not defecate in their lairs). At other times, we would at least expect biology and culture not to be completely opposed to each other. (If all spontaneous behaviour were of a hostile nature, culture could hardly prescribe loving behaviour with any success).
talking about culture, we tend to stress its arbitrary, conventional status; in talking about nature, we tend to stress its immutability (in any particular case). The culture/nature dichotomy governing our thought (and, if we are to believe Lévi-Strauss, that of every culture, in some form or another) makes it extremely difficult to think the two terms as a conjunction, rather than an exclusive disjunction.\textsuperscript{329} It is no wonder that culturalists (like Arnold Davidson) would have preferred a Freud who treats people as sexual tabulae rasae, just waiting to be written on by culture. It would have made for less aporias in his thought. Freud minus biology would have suited the traditional Left far better as well: he would then have been easier to reappropriate along optimistic lines. (The idea of a post-revolutionary utopia exempt from Freud’s frequently dismal picture of human society could then be entertained). However, to admit a role for biology, even a crucial one, is not the same as being able to say what the biologically given is in any particular case, and how it interacts with the non-biological. You’re damned if you try to include biology, and damned if you leave it out.

The resistances Freud lists seem to be linked to general features of culture, despite his musings on their possible biological base. In listing the sexual resistances Freud seems to have also given us a fairly comprehensive list of the forces shaping (or dams channelling) behaviour so that it conforms to social\textit{ rules}.\textsuperscript{330} Why do we stick to rules? Because of authority, the prescriptions of morality, shame at being seen to contravene them, disgust at the thought of contraventions, hostility towards rivals (at least the rules also keep them in check), pity for those who would otherwise suffer (all those little old ladies who invested their money in my scheme), horror (it would suit me better if he were dead, but I can’t bring myself to stab him), aesthetic ideals, the threat of pain. These resistances cover the whole gamut from non-moral (pain) to moral (compassion). This suggests that a blanket judgment on the perversions would throw together phenomena that do not have the same moral status.

Freud would not be Freud if the picture we have sketched thus far, were not subject to a paradoxical complication: “The sexual instinct in its strength enjoys overriding this disgust.” (152) What opposes the sexual instinct is thus also a stimulus to it.\textsuperscript{331} This sexualises everything usually designated as disgusting (for instance, subaltern women). Through this mechanism

\begin{footnotes}

\footnote{329}{This dichotomy should thus be deconstructed, we could say; a deconstruction broached in no small measure by Freud himself.}

\footnote{330}{I skip the difficult issue of the question where causal agency must be said to lie. In the rules themselves? Then disgust, shame and so on would only be indexes of the fact that the rules with which they are associated are effective. In the resistances? Then the rules would only become effective inasmuch as they were linked to the resistances.}

\footnote{331}{We are reminded of Foucault, according to whom the prohibitions that are often seen as limiting the free play of what would otherwise have been an untrammelled, natural sexuality, are actually internally constitutive of sexuality.}

\end{footnotes}
othered groups will simultaneously tend to be objects of disgust and objects of desire. (Cf. the subsections on love and debasement, p. 274ff., below). Freud tells us that where the “barrier of pity” is absent or insufficiently strong, “the connection between the cruel and the erotogenic instincts, … established in childhood, may prove unbreakable later in life.” (193) One can imagine that the more the other becomes the object of our disgust, the less he or she will be the object of our compassion; disgust would then pave the way for cruelty.332

Although incest was not discussed among the perversions, Freud would presumably consider it to be one as well.333 (It would in any case not seem out of place in the heterogeneous cluster of phenomena that Freud classifies as perversions). Although Freud only discusses the “barrier against incest” toward the end of the Three Essays (in the context of what would later become known as “the Oedipus complex”), this topic thematically seems to belong here, with the other resistances.

No doubt the simplest course for the child would be to choose as his sexual objects the same persons whom, since his childhood, he has loved … But, by the postponing of sexual maturation, time has been gained in which the child can erect, among other restraints on sexuality, the barrier against incest, and can thus take up into himself the moral precepts which expressly exclude from his object-choice, as being blood-relations, the persons whom he has loved in his childhood. Respect for this barrier is essentially a cultural demand made by society. (225)

And in a 1920 footnote, Freud adds the celebrated words:

Every new arrival on this planet is faced by the task of mastering the Oedipus complex. (226n)

Needless to say, this task is seldom fulfilled optimally. Even where neurosis is avoided, the infantile object-choice continues to serve as prototype for later ones. (228)

Freud’s achievement (and that of the predecessors he draws upon in this regard) was perhaps first of all an ability to obtain a certain distance from the very judgements (“disgusting!” “immoral!” “disgraceful!”) that serve to channel polymorphously perverse infantile sexuality into something resembling normality. The very resistances that shape sexuality itself, are also obstacles that have to be overcome before sexuality can be understood. The norms shaping the object have generally tended to contaminate its theorisation.

---

332 One could also go into the role of the other resistances (hostility, shame, aesthetic ideals) in othering.
333 Other interesting omissions from the list of perversions are: masturbation, ‘promiscuity’, nymphomania, satyromania and rape.
NORMALITY, NATURE AND CULTURE

In advancing his view of normality, in which the act most likely to lead to insemination functions as the norm, Freud seems to be basing himself on certain assumptions about the evolutionary rationale of sexual behaviour. Specifically, building on XIXth Century sexology, he seems to have a fairly definite and limited view of

i) what it would entail to presuppose that human beings have been programmed in the course of evolution with a tendency to engage in behaviour that will lead to the survival of the species

ii) whether an evolutionary rationale cannot be given for non-reproductive sexual behaviour as well

iii) the extent to which cultural sexual norms should adhere to evolutionary dictates.

Re (i): It is imaginable that a varied population, in which some people engage in reproductive behaviour, and some don’t, could have survival value for the species. (Think of ants and bees). This variety could be something innate; it could also be a response of one and the same genetic endowment to different environments. (Population pressure could for instance lead to a highly functional decrease in reproductive sexual behaviour, as opposed to all other forms). It is not clear that it would be functional for those who reproduce to do so as often as possible. But even if this were the case, it would not be functional to have heterosexual coitus more often than is needed for insemination. (In humans, reproductive behaviour is not limited to periods of heat, as in most other species). In other words, polymorphously perverse behaviour that resulted in the female being inseminated roughly once every nine months would already be completely functional from a biological, evolutionary point of view that held (implausibly) that we are programmed for maximally reproductive, but monogamous, behaviour.

334 Before the advent of modern techniques of artificial insemination.

335 This account thus presupposes monogamy. We could also, following Dawkins (1976), take the “selfish gene” tack. The male and the female would then be programmed differently, to optimise the reproductive chances of their own genes. Freud’s model of normality involving a rapid traversing of “foreplay” (no undue lingering here, please) would then perhaps—but not necessarily—be in line with the male’s genes’ imperative to inseminate as many women as often as possible (a more economical strategy for self-reproduction than siring few children, and then hanging around to help ensure their survival till fertility). The female’s genes would however lead to other imperatives: securing the full commitment of the father to the survival and reproduction of her children (including the cases where she knows or suspects that they are not his). Doubtless evolutionary theory will produce new models and new rationales as time goes by; the virtue for our present purposes of this particular rewriting of it (beyond a certain prima facie plausibility) is, in the first place, that one could draw very different conclusions from an evolutionary point of view than Freud does, and, in the second place, that biology would on this account not dictate the same behaviour for the male as for the female; what is optimal for each would be very different, so that they would not meet in a shared behaviour that is sexually “normal”—no shared norm could then be based on biology.
ii) Even in animals we find play, elaborate courtship rituals, as well as penetration of males by other males. If we find Darwinism plausible (which I tend to), we will suspect that all these behaviours are also functional. Heterosexual genital intercourse is not the only aim that could have an evolutionary rationale. Sexual play in humans need then not be “foreplay” to the real job.

iii) Evolutionary considerations leave radically underdetermined what sexual behaviour we should find desirable, acceptable or commendable. Non-reproductive forms of sexuality can be seen as commendable, even if they fly in the face of everything we are biologically programmed to do. Even if the good, the beautiful, the pleasurable, the interesting or the exciting were to be non-functional (or dysfunctional) in evolutionary terms, we could choose, as an ideal, to go for them rather than the functional.

Freud’s linkage of biology and sexual normality is ambiguous. (A different line in his thought, which we have already discussed above, makes sex serve a purely psychological function: the reduction of tension). In a way, the Pope is more consistent when he condemns heterosexual genital intercourse with contraceptives together with various other forms of non-reproductive sexual behaviour. The moment we relinquish the norm that sex must be in the service of reproduction, keeping a focus on heterosexual genital intercourse becomes in need of an argument—an argument Freud fails to supply.

FREUD AS AN OTHERER

If Freud de-others various groups that have been previously othered by emphasising their continuity with the groups that they were paradigmatically opposed to, any exaggeration of the differences between a benchmark group and another group will risk othering the latter. This is exactly what happens with women (as opposed to the benchmark group “men”) and children (as opposed to the benchmark group “adults”). Freud’s othering of women is discussed later in this section, under the heading: “Average uncultivated women” and prostitutes, p.279.

As for children: because the pathological is equated with the infantile, they—and the infantile as such—are pathologised. “Like a child” tends to have the negative connotations of “childish” or “infantile”, rather than the positive ones of “childlike”. Freud’s theory has the beneficent effect of countering the idealisation of children (which can metamorphose into the victimisation of children when they do not conform to the posited ideal). But Freud’s tendency to make the pathological and faulty essentially infantile, reinforces the idea that the status of the child is essentially something to be overcome. It goes without saying that there is much in children that has to be overcome—egocentrism, lack of empathy, cruelty, etc. However, I cannot help seeing Christian and Zen injunctions that “becoming like a child” and “having beginner’s mind” as often

---

336 In an overpopulated world, or a massively radioactive world after a nuclear war, one could make a strong case for the conviction that they are the only commendable forms of sexuality.
apt signposts to behaviour that is more creative, ethically or spiritually superior, or simply: more appropriate, less wrong. If Freud had been simply and evidently correct regarding the nature of infantile sexuality, and its relation to neurosis and perversions, then these objections would have little force. But it is clear that Freud’s notion of infantile sexuality is a construct for which neither the arguments in his text nor subsequent empirical research provide compelling evidence.

One could future argue that in Freud’s approach, nobody escapes being ‘tainted’ with abnormality. Freud’s notions of perversion, neurosis and pathology are linked to criteria for normality that are varying strict—almost nobody complies with them, vague—it is hard to say whether somebody complies with them, and undecidable—they are unstable in determining whether people are normal or abnormal. As a result of this less and less people are classified as normal, and everybody tends to be pathologised. All civilised men are said to suffer from psychic impotence (1912d—SE XI: 185); the slips of the tongue or pen to which we are all prone become instances of “the psychopathology of everyday life”, “Every normal person, in fact, is only normal on the average. His ego approximates to that of the psychotic in some part or other and to a greater or lesser extent …” (1937c—SE XXIII: 235), etc.

I have a long-standing ambivalence towards this move on Freud’s part. On the one hand, this may just be the price the Self has to pay, in the form of a necessary loss of innocence, so that the denigration of the Other can be countered. The internal Other must be acknowledged before we can reconcile ourselves with it and, more importantly for ethics, with the external Other. On the other hand, we can say that this approach wounds people unnecessarily; the way of countering othering offered by the psychoanalytic theory of sexuality can be improved upon. However much we may relativise notions of normality, as Freud indeed does, such notions will still lead to differences between people being seen as different ways of deviating from the norm, the ideal. Our very differences will be signs of our deficiency in the light of the Platonic Form of humanity enshrined in the notion of normality.

In “Analysis terminable and interminable” (1937c—SE XXIII: 250; GW 16: 96) we read: “Our aim will not be to rub off every peculiarity of human character [alle menschliche Eigenarten abzuschleifen; abschleifen—to grind down, to take off the rough edges] for the sake of a schematic ‘normality’”; however, the notion of normality has an intrinsic tendency to do exactly

337 In fact, despite these negative implications of his own theory, Freud had a lifelong fondness for children, and in many ways viewed them in a more favourable light than he did adults:

- We have rated the powers of children too low and … there is no knowing what they cannot be given credit for. (1918b—SE XVII: 103)
- Think of the depressing contrast between the radiant intelligence of a healthy child and the feeble intellectual powers of the average adult. (1927c—SE XXI: 47—Freud goes on to ascribe this contrast to the stunting effects of religious education).
this. Every deviation from the norm becomes a blemish, wound, disease, growth or tumour which
defaces its bearer, burdens him with a (pocket in his) being that is fundamentally flawed;
something any responsible person will worry about, and not leave to ‘fester’ (in herself or her
children); something that cannot be benignly neglected. An image for, and perhaps example of
this is to be found in those societies where plastic surgery, orthodontic surgery, and so on have
become so completely ingrained that your smallish breasts, lumpy nose, baldness or buck teeth
can no longer simply be seen as part of who you are. These “human particularities” have to be
“ground down”. Not changing them then becomes an active decision, an act of defiance. Like the
person refusing to use deodorant, you are perceived as a social embarrassment who insists on
rubbing your deformities under everybody’s nose.

Nobody is normal, and everybody ends up mourning the fact. Perhaps mourning what one is, has
become and has done—in psychoanalytic terms: mourning the wounds to one’s narcissism—is
often unavoidable as a prelude to coming to terms with old disappointments. However, what one
needs to mourn about should not be that one is abnormal, as such.

We have been discussing the validity of a particular norm—‘normality’, as understood by Freud.
However, one should also question the very activity of imposing norms harshly, regardless of
their content. If I other, it is important for my psychological and ethical growth that I
acknowledge the other in myself. But a parallel movement is as important, or more important:
learning to relax all those norms, many of them utterly futile, by which we split ourselves, and
humanity, into Self and Other in the first place. I often find myself saying of somebody that he or
she is “terribly normative”, when the person in question has a strong tendency to polarise the
world in terms of his or her values. The bearing of this on our theme of othering is as follows:
othering is usually associated with certain contents in how we judge others: are we, for example,
sexist, homophobic, racist, etc.? However, for othering the harshness of the judgement is as
important. Any norm or value, when applied harshly, can lead to othering.

Even when a person is quite politically correct, that is to say, not a racist, sexist, etc., his
judgements can still display this polarising normativity: a relentless division of humanity into
those who are interesting or amusing and those who are boring; those who are intelligent and
those who are stupid; competent and incompetent; productive and unproductive, worthwhile and
worthless. The judgement on those who (or those aspects of oneself that) fall on the wrong side of
each of these divisions can consign them to outer darkness as damningly as any that was ever
made by a moralising bigot or pathologising psychiatrist in the past. In this form of
fundamentalism (which is usually not labelled as such) the values themselves need not be
(particularly) objectionable. Perhaps this is the form of othering threatening a future politically
correct society that is non-sexist, non-racist, homophilic and so on, but where one nevertheless
constantly has to sell oneself (and reinvent oneself so as to sell oneself) as a commodity on the
market: the labour market, friendship market, partner market, sexual market—sell oneself as a
superior product, to oneself and others. This market structurally creates its own Other (everything
that makes one less marketable) and Others (everybody who is not marketable). Because the market is so hard to oppose, given all the structural forces keeping it in place, the othering intrinsic to it will be very hard to combat.

The notion of normality is a comparatively recent invention. Inasmuch as it has become ingrained, it differs from one (sub-)culture to the next, one period to the next. As more and more parts of post-industrial society start functioning as markets, the notion of normality tends to become supplanted by (or transformed into) that of marketability. To this is linked a form of othering that is growing more and more important in post-industrial society but has not yet caught the attention of the discourse of alterity.

Freud is centrally concerned with the harshness of what he will later call the superego, and the psychoanalyst interpreting somebody who is terribly normative, will express this in late Freudian language by saying that he or she has a harsh superego. (An especially harsh superego; the superego tends to be harsh even at the best of times).

In talking about normality, Freud opposes the harshness that was common to the way his predecessors and contemporaries used the term. However, compared to an ideally non-judgemental discourse—and even compared to many real people who are non-judgemental—Freud’s discourse of normality is itself harsh, and at the very least still too conducive to being used in a harsh and judgemental fashion by laymen and psychoanalysts. When this happens, it itself becomes an instrument of othering.338

NON-OTHERING ALTERNATIVES TO THE NOTION OF ‘SEXUAL NORMALITY’

All the axiological questions about sexuality which Freud discusses centre around the notion of sexual normality and abnormality (perversion, neurosis, psychosis). In this subsection I suggest alternative ways to discuss sexual norms and values.

338 Cf. the anonymous person who (according to Stroeken 1985: 64) called Dora “one of the most repulsive hysterics he had ever seen”. A friend of mine, who is a therapist and part-time manager of a therapeutic centre, bemoans the deep-seated, but needless tendency of the psychoanalysts in the centre to pathologise their clients. Freud could himself at times pass sweeping judgements on people in a way that sounds shocking today. In his correspondence with Edoardo Weiss (Freud and Weiss 1970e (1973)), for instance, he refers to one of Weiss’s patients as a “good for nothing” [Der Mann taugt doch zu nichts - 42; cf. also 1905a—SE VII: 263], and another as a “patent blackguard” [offenbarer Lump - 48]. Some pages on (50) he remarks: “Unfortunately only few patients are worth the effort we devote to them.” Compare also 1904a—SE VII: 254: “worthless character”.
If we must formulate and apply sexual norms, it behoves us to do so with circumspection, given the difficulty of formulating general truths here, the dubious benefits to be obtained by applying such norms, and the suffering and harm that such norms have caused in the past.

If one opposes an “anything goes” approach to sexuality, then any positing of norms should be completely subordinate to other issues:

a) whether a particular form of sexual behaviour involves suffering on the part of its object (or subject);

b) whether the subject (or object) finds the activity fulfilling;

c) limitations on the practical consequences attached to the conclusions reached regarding (a) and (b), i.e., limitations based on adults’ (or: people’s) right to freely enter into behaviour or relationships that they do not find fulfilling or that make them suffer;339
d) the utmost reticence in deciding for others (or influencing them regarding) what is to count as “harm”, “suffering”, “fulfilment” or “lack of fulfilment”.

Inasmuch as we do apply norms, whether something is or is not a “perversion” is relatively uninformative. Only some of the so-called ‘perversions’ can generally be seen as objectionable (Like most of my readers, presumably, I would for instance condemn the intercourse of adults with babies, but not homosexuality). The norms we invoke, should not be medical. To call a term like “perversion” medical, may in fact be to miss analysing it thoroughly. The connotations of the term “perversion” differ from those of medical terms such as “cancer”, “osteoporosis”, or “kidney failure”, which themselves are often problematic, in an axiological and epistemological sense. The medical discourse does not entirely replace an older moral discourse, but overlaps or interacts with it.

Similarly, when Freud speaks of “pathology” in the context of the perversions and the neuroses, this raises all sorts of questions. If neuroses are the negative of the perversions, and the neuroses are pathological, will perversions not (often or even generally) be a healthy alternative to the pathology of the neuroses? Moreover, we can even question the appositeness of the notion of pathology in the case of the neuroses. A neurosis can be seen as an escape route out of a situation in which demands conflict:

Between the pressure of the instinct and his antagonism to sexuality, illness offers him [the neurotic] a way of escape. (165)

Is it ever appropriate to see an escape route as an illness? This question becomes especially pressing when it is recognised that everybody can be seen as neurotic. Every training analysis

---

339 Although Freud generally seems to entertain liberal views regarding the permissibility of “perverse” acts between consenting adults, he does not make the essential move of explicitly saying that when it comes to questions of what acts consenting adults are allowed to engage in, this is an ethical and political question which exceeds the competence of “experts” from the field of medicine or sexology.
displays much the same phenomena as that of the card-carrying neurotic. All the possible strategies for dealing with the conflicts of life are imperfect; each strategy has different advantages and disadvantages. Such strategies therefore cannot be neatly divided into “healthy” and “pathological” ones.340

Sexual morality should be based on the sorts of principles and considerations that are also invoked elsewhere341: non-maleficence (not wanting to cause harm or suffering), beneficence (wishing the well-being and, where possible, happiness of oneself and others), respect for autonomy, etc. According to such criteria many forms of non-pervasive sexuality can be highly deficient—a so-called ‘normal’ focus on adult heterosexual non-incestuous genital intercourse is completely compatible with being an insensitive or callous partner and lover, even one who resorts to force where wooing fails. (158) Conversely, not every form or instance of “perversion” need be deficient—I find it hard to believe that a sexual relationship between, say, a thirty year old and a fourteen year old must always be harmful, in all cultural contexts, regardless of the individuals involved and the particulars of their relationship.

Valuations of a different kind are those embodied in one’s own aesthetic considerations and ideas about what does or doesn’t constitute an ars amandi, strictly for private use. Here again, circumspection is called for, because what seems to promise greater fulfilment can in fact be self-defeating. (For instance, because it imposes standards of performance, and undermines confidence, playfulness and a non-goal-directed acceptance of every sexual encounter as it happens to turn out).

Some idea of what constitutes fulfilling sexual relations can help shape sexual behaviour in the desired direction. Think of the role of listening, talking, flirtation, fantasy, good food, wine or a change of scenery in enhancing the pleasure, intimacy or significance of erotic experience. The question is not what is ‘normal’—the sexual partners harmonise by both being ‘normal’—but

340 A substantial body of research indicates that depressives are less deluded than non-depressives (cf. Sackeim 1983; Van den Bout and Kienhorst 1985). At what point does depressive non-delusion—or non-depressive delusion—become pathological?

341 Perhaps the taboo on incest resists my attempts at assimilating sexual norms to a broader ethical and aesthetic discourse. (Does Freud acknowledge that the case of incest is a separate one by not listing it among the perversions?) Lacan (1986) claims that this taboo cannot be justified. It is a general fact that sexuality is explosive. One could argue that people generally do not understand the way in which the very fabric of society depends on certain rules governing sexual behaviour (e.g. those against incest), and that for this reason some of the ‘categorical’ imperatives regarding sexual relations cannot be replaced by people’s ‘own’ insights on the basis of experience and reflection. However, psychoanalysts (like Welldon 1988) often feel little compunction in explaining how and why incest harms its victims. (Inasmuch as asymmetries of power are sufficient to justify the term “victims”). Even if we find such accounts convincing, we may still find, with the Lacanian, that they cannot sufficiently justify the taboo on incest, with its unconditional status.
sensitivity and negotiation regarding the specific, de facto needs, wishes, hang-ups, desiderata or passion-killers of those involved.

Freud intended his theory neither as a general theory of sexuality (130), nor as an ars amandi. (His discourse is obviously very different from something like the Kama Sutra or the Taoist treatises on sex). Its focus is linked to his specific therapeutic and theoretical concerns. We can, however, ask what biases and restrictions of vision such a focus gives, especially as the Freudian discourse on sexuality has come to define our sexual self-interpretation to such a large extent. To an extensive group of educated people it seems as if this discourse on sexuality limns the contours of the sexual an sich. Partly because the descriptive and the normative are inextricably entwined in the Freudian discourse on sexuality, it is read as a source of norms—prescriptions—regarding sexuality.

Despite Freud’s emphasis on how high and unattainable the ideal of sexual normality is, we could also see it as an impoverished ideal, in which any “art” or “play” is irrelevant, as long as there is heterosexual intercourse that lasts a sufficient number of minutes, and does not linger unduly on foreplay. We are induced to think of sex/love as a form of work, rather than an art, or something potentially—and perhaps even essentially—playful: Freud treats it as goal-directed, and as analysable in terms of efficiency, efficacy and productivity—an economical (i.e. parsimonious) use of resources. A less friendly reading of Freud would say that his ideal of normality is one in which normal male sexual behaviour is disturbingly close to the paradigm of heterosexual genital rape (itself not listed among the perversions); many of the perversions could then be said to be forms of sexuality that depart too far from this paradigm (by an undue lingering on foreplay, etc.—everything but actual penetration).

---

342 Regarding sex as an art, fairness demands that we note that most artes amandi are pretty useless when it comes to acknowledging and addressing, as does psychoanalysis, the essential issue of deep-seated emotional obstacles to sexual enjoyment.

Interestingly enough, Freud in 1908 expressed the idea that an academy of love, such as existed in antiquity, should be refounded, in which the ars amandi would be taught. (Nunberg and Federn 1976: 293)

343 Another example of the teleological strand in the Three Essays is the following (note the should):

Certain intermediate relations to the sexual object, such as touching and looking … are themselves accompanied by pleasure, and … intensify the excitation, which should persist until the final sexual aim is attained. [bis zur Erreichung des endgültigen Sexualziels] (149-150; GW 49)

The German Ziel erreichen is also used for journeys: reaching the goal. Strachey’s decision to translate Sexualziel by “sexual aim” leaves the teleological structure intact, but misses out on the implicit journey metaphor resonating here. Freud’s sexual man seems like somebody travelling to another city on business: it is always an extra boon if the scenery along the way offers certain charms; the aim of the journey, however, lies in reaching the destination. In this case travelling is a form of work, while for the tourist the pleasures of the journey need in no way be subordinate to the pleasures lying at its end.
Together with the notion of normality, we have in effect jettisoned that of perversion, or in any case seriously restricted its role. In doing so, do we not risk depriving ourselves of a fundamental Freudian insight: his claim that the neuroses are the negative of the perversions? I doubt it. If there is truth in this claim of Freud’s, it is not to my mind a truth about perversion or neurosis as supracultural entities. Neurosis occurs where people have sexual desires they find unacceptable, and therefore repress. (Or otherwise deny access to consciousness). What desires they find unacceptable will depend largely on their socialisation, i.e. on that which dominant discourses or significant others have explicitly or implicitly identified to them as unacceptable. The notion of ‘perversion’ adds nothing to this.

In conclusion, a disclaimer: I by no means want to suggest that sexuality is intrinsically an unproblematic, conflict-free phenomenon, and that sexual suffering will make way for (well-nigh) universal sexual fulfilment once we stop imposing harsh and inappropriate norms on it. This would fly in the face of all psychoanalytic wisdom.

**“THE CONTINUOUSLY DISAPPEARING AND REAPPEARING OBJECT IN THE FREUDIAN NOTION OF SEXUALITY”: THE OBJECT AND ITS VICISSITUDES IN THE THREE ESSAYS**

**DIFFICULTIES IN FREUD’S ARGUMENTS AGAINST THE IMPORTANCE OF THE OBJECT IN INFANTILE SEXUALITY**

Above (p. 205), we saw that for Freud, thumb-sucking demonstrates “the essential features of infantile sexual activity” (181), such as that it is directed not at an object, but at obtaining satisfaction from erotogenic zones. Inasmuch as the erotogenic zones take centre stage in Freud’s view of infantile sexuality, the object becomes less important. Here we want to show how

---

344 Cf. the following passage, which we have already quoted above:

The symptoms of hysterical patients … are substitutes—transcriptions, as it were—for a number of emotionally cathexed mental processes, wishes and desires, which … have been prevented from obtaining discharge in *psychical activity that is admissible to consciousness*. [bewusstseinsfähige psychische Tätigkeit] (164; GW 63—my emphases)

345 Freud’s idea that full sexual satisfaction is prevented by something intrinsic to sexuality itself is discussed below. (p. 289ff.)

346 (Bersani 1986: 36)

347 Freud implicitly says as much in at least one place:

Infantile life, in spite of the preponderating dominance of the erotogenic zones, exhibits components which from the very first involve other people as sexual objects. Such are the instincts of scopophilia, exhibitionism and cruelty. (191-192)

The implication is clearly: the component instincts associated with the erotogenic zones do not “from the very first involve other people as sexual objects”. However, *all* of the component instincts explicitly listed
problematic Freud’s arguments on this score are, even before we take into account his own frequent reaffirmation of the importance, already in infantile sexual life, of the object and the genitals.

With an uncharacteristically explicit dogmatism, Freud says:

> The part played in this by the erotogenic zones is … clear. What is true of one of them is true of all. [T]hey are used to make possible, through the medium of the forepleasure which can be derived from them …, the production of the greater pleasure of satisfaction.

(210-211)

In the subsequent pages, desire and its satisfaction, forepleasure and end-pleasure are all described in essentially solipsistic terms. In fact, where an “object” is mentioned in this context, this is not a person, but “the mucous membrane of the vagina”, which is designated as the (“appropriate”) “object” of (male) end-pleasure.348 We find ourselves in the strange position that it is exactly the “dangers of fore-pleasure” (211) that may free us from the solipsism that according to much of Freud’s account is intrinsic to sexuality. The “danger” associated with fore-pleasure is exactly that of perversion: “many perversions … consist in a lingering over the preparatory acts of the sexual process”. (211) Succumbing to such dangers may make sex more of an affair between persons, rather than between erotogenic zones; something for which seduction, rather than rape, is paradigmatic.

This is in marked contrast to the passage in the 1915 section on “Libido theory”, where Freud tells us that ego-libido can only be studied psychoanalytically “when it has become object-libido.” (217) This would suggest that psychoanalysis must remain silent about any solipsistic sexuality. Nevertheless, even here, a decade after the original edition of the Three Essays, the solipsistic position is taken to be primary:

> The narcissistic libidinal cathexis of the ego is the original state of things [Urzustand], realized in earliest childhood, and is merely covered by the later extrusions of libido, but in essentials persists behind them. (218; GW 119)

349 by Freud seem to involve other people as sexual objects. “Touching and being touched” are the only instincts not mentioned in the quoted passage, and it is not plausible that they intrinsically lack an object.

348 Previously, in a passage going back to the first edition, the goal of male genital arousal is described in far more general terms, which are compatible with anal and oral sex:

> At puberty … in a man, the penis, which has now become capable of erection, presses forward insistently towards the new sexual aim—penetration into a cavity in the body which excites his genital zone. (222)

349 This is in line with the earlier passage in which we hear that the effects of seduction … confuse our view of [the early history of the sexual instinct] by presenting children prematurely with a sexual object for which the infantile sexual instinct at first shows no need. (191)
On closer inspection, Freud’s introduction of the notion of erotogenic zones is highly problematic:

a) The erotogenic zones are supposed to clarify the component instincts, specifically: sadomasochism and the scopophilia/exhibitionism pair. The erotogenic zone for sadomasochism is said to be the skin. But sadomasochism can be broken down into two pairs of components: firstly, sadism (the “active” position in sadomasochism) and masochism (the “passive” position in sadomasochism), and secondly, sadomasochism as involving physical pain, or as involving mental pain. The skin as erotogenic zone seems germane to (an explanation of) masochism inasmuch as it involves physical pain. But for the other three positions, it is not clear how they relate to the skin (or any other erotogenic zone) of their subject. When the sadist inflicts pain on somebody else, this need not involve the sadist’s skin. (In any case, not in the way Freud’s description of the nature and functioning of erotogenic zones suggests it does). Nor is the skin involved where sadomasochism deals in humiliation, rather than pain (or, to put it differently, in mental, rather than physical, pain).

b) The erotogenic zone involved in scopophilia and exhibitionism is said to be the eye. (111) Firstly, by an argument parallel to the one advanced in the previous paragraph, if scopophilia involves the scopophilic subject’s eye, it is not clear that exhibitionism involves the exhibitionistic subject’s eye in any similar way. Moreover, we can doubt whether the eye in scopophilia really functions as an erotogenic zone in the way the skin supposedly does in pain-masochism, the genitals do in genital sex, or erotogenic zones are said to function across-the-board. Is there a tension in this organ, which is then taken away by looking? Should we with Freud posit a scopophilic drive of which the “immediate aim lies in the removal of the organic stimulus” to the eye? Seeing (or looking) is not a sensation of the eye (cf. “visual impression” [optische Eindruck] (156; GW 55)) in the way in which pain after whipping is a sensation in the skin.

c) I would venture to say that Freud is spectacularly unsuccessful in illuminating sadomasochism and scopophilia/exhibitionism through the use of the notion of erotogenic zones. Perhaps this notion is less problematic when it concerns the genitals, the anus and the mouth. However, these are not the zones Freud initially discusses in introducing the concept.

d) It is striking that in discussing the erotogenic zones, Freud does not find it necessary to say anything about the object. This suggests, firstly, that the erotogenic zones can function, or generally function, in a solipsistic mode, and, secondly, that if sadomasochism and scopophilia/exhibitionism first of all need to be illuminated using the notion of erotogenic zones, what is

---

A sexual aim … consists in replacing the projected sensation of stimulation in the erotogenic zone by an external stimulus which removes that sensation by producing a feeling of satisfaction. (184)

Cf. footnote 276.
important in them is not the relation to an object, but the basically private issue of pleasurable sensations in certain bodily zones. This is unlikely even in the case of pain-masochism; when it comes to the other options: pain-sadism, humiliation-sadomasochism, exhibitionism and scopophilia, it becomes wildly implausible, and, as we have seen, Freud admits as much. (192) All these phenomena should be seen as essentially intersubjective. If I aim at a particular effect on the eye or skin of the other, they do not function as erotogenic zones for me, in the way Freud explicitly thematises them in the Three Essays.

The genitals, anus, mouth, eye and skin are highly charged symbols. Perhaps the genitals, mouth and anus actually also function as erotogenic zones. Even here, however, there is most probably a dialectic between their value as symbol and their characteristics as erotogenic zones.

Freud’s notion of “organisations of the libido” should perhaps be read as superseding the simpler notion of erotogenic zones; the anal, oral, phallic or genital organisations of the libido involve whole ways of viewing human relationships and the world for which certain bodily organs and functions serve as model; they do not simply reflect a subject’s fixation on particular erotogenic zones of his or her own body.

(e) When Freud discusses “muscular activity” as a source of infantile sexuality, it initially joins the other sources he mentions in sounding like something that does not relate to an object, something in which sexual excitation is caused by bodily “sensations”. (202) However, the examples Freud gives are all object-directed: “romping or wrestling with … playmates”. Moreover,

[an inclination to physical struggles [Muskelstreit—muscular struggles] with some one particular person, just as in later years an inclination to verbal disputes [Wortstreit], is a convincing sign that object-choice has fallen on him. (203; GW 104)

If Muskelstreit can so easily be replaced by Wortstreit, then it is plausible to assume that the crucial element in Muskelstreit is Streit—the intersubjective sparring—rather than the Muskeln as site of (auto-)erotic sensations.

FREUD’S OWN ACKNOWLEDGMENT OF THE IMPORTANCE OF THE OBJECT AND GENITALS IN INFANTILE SEXUALITY

Despite Freud’s many affirmations (e.g. 181-187) that “infantile sexual life … is essentially auto-erotic (i.e. that it finds its object in the infant’s own body)” (197), he repeatedly corrects himself

---

352 In the following Aristotelian passage:

Sexual excitation arises (a) as a reproduction of a satisfaction experienced in connection with other organic processes, (b) through appropriate peripheral stimulation of erotogenic zones and (c) as an expression of certain instincts. (200)

Note that the object plays no role in this taxonomy of sexual excitation.
by a supplementary emphasis on the importance of the object and the genitals, even in infantile sexuality.

The notion of erotogenic zones was meant to shed light on component instincts such as scopophilia, exhibitionism and cruelty. Freud contradicts himself when, on the one hand, he insists on interpreting the erotogenic zones as essentially auto-erotic, and on the other, he admits that these three component instincts “from the very first involve other people as sexual objects”. To us it is clear that the pole which must yield if this contradiction is to be resolved, is the one claiming that (certain component instincts associated with) the erotogenic zones are essentially auto-erotic.

Earlier we tried to show that the notion of the substitutability of objects (barter) need not lead to the theory of libido (a money economy without barter). Our current argument is related to this.

Experience of “abnormal” cases

has shown us that in them the sexual instinct and the sexual object are merely soldered together—a fact which we have been in danger of overlooking in consequence of the uniformity of the normal picture, where the object seems to form part and parcel of the instinct. We are thus warned to loosen the bond that exists in our thought between instinct and object. It seems probable that the sexual instinct is in the first instance independent of its object; nor is its origin likely to be due to its object’s attractions [Reizen—attractions or stimuli]. (148; GW 47)353

Under a great number of conditions and in surprisingly numerous individuals, the nature and importance [Wert—value] of the sexual object recedes into the background. What is essential and constant in the sexual instinct is something else. (149) These quotes need not be read as supporting the idea that infantile sexuality is essentially auto-erotic, but only that any object of the sexual drive is susceptible to replacement by another object. Auto-erotism could then be one possible substitution, where the own body is substituted for another object, rather than being the initial, object-less position. (This would elide the distinction between narcissism and auto-erotism). Similarly, there is no need for believing that the ego functions as the original and default reservoir of libido.

As for Freud’s explicit “recanting”:

The ‘Analysis of a Phobia in a Five-Year-Old Boy’ (1909b) has … made [us] aware of a defect in the account I have given in the text, which, in the interests of lucidity, describes the conceptual distinction between the two phases of auto-erotism and object-love as

353 An already quoted passage from the Traumdeutung also uses the notion of two things that are “merely soldered together”:

The release of affect and the ideational content do not constitute the indissoluble organic unity as which we are in the habit of treating them, but … these two separate entities may be merely soldered together and can thus be detached from each other by analysis. (1900a—SE V: 461-462)
though it were also a separation in time. But … children between the ages of three and five are capable of very clear object-choices, accompanied by strong affects. (194n; added in 1910)

I for one cannot believe that Freud’s very explicit statements regarding an initial auto-erotic phase could at the time of writing only have been intended as a “conceptual distinction”. Moreover, the importance of the object is here only explicitly stated for the period from three to five, not for the first years of life. In 1920, Freud will elsewhere modify his text to make the first wave of object-choice start at the age of two.

One of our most surprising findings [was] that this early efflorescence of infantile sexual life (between the ages of two and five) already gives rise to the choice of an object, with all the wealth of mental activities which such a process involves. (234; cf. also 200)

That this finding is called “surprising” shows the depth of Freud’s bias in favour of the auto-erotic character of infantile sexuality. Freud keeps on explicitly or implicitly adducing evidence against this position, without, however, abandoning it. Instead, the evidence is taken to demand no more than a qualifying supplement to his vision of infantile sexuality as essentially auto-erotic. The 1905 pronouncement:

In childhood, therefore, the sexual instinct is without an object, that is, auto-erotic. (233)

in 1920 becomes

In childhood, therefore, the sexual instinct is not unified, and is at first without an object, that is, auto-erotic. (233)

This modification hardly does justice to the extent to which Freud has whittled away at his own findings: An object-oriented phase (during breast-feeding) precedes the auto-erotic phase (e.g. thumb-sucking); by the age of three, no, two, we already have “the choice of an object, with all the wealth of mental activities which such a process involves”. Auto-erotism would thus have free rein, in some children, between the age of weaning and the age of two. A very essential essence it must be, that can hold its own in the face of so many accidents all pointing in a different direction! We have already shown the fragility of the other arguments, which depend on stressing the importance of the erotogenic zones, which would make the activities in which they are involved essentially solipsistic.

I cannot avoid the conclusion that, as with the difference between male and female sexuality, Freud artificially sharpens the distinction between infantile and adult sexuality. The idea that perversions and neuroses are symptomatic of a fixation at (or regression to) an earlier phase of sexual development then becomes much less plausible.354 The nature of infantile sexuality is

354 On the first page of the “Summary”, to account for the perversions, instead of the usual fixation/regression schema, Freud introduces a rather different pair of alternatives: fixation (inhibition; Hemmung) vs. dissociation:
supposed to explain countless phenomena of adult neurosis or perversion. However, the evidence that this is the nature of infantile sexuality lies mostly in these very neuroses and perversions (it goes without saying: as interpreted by Freud). He himself admits that the direct observation of children would in itself not have led to his theories.\textsuperscript{355,356}

We saw above (p. 207) that Freud in 1915 concedes that in the oral phase, the object-oriented sexual activity of suckling at the breast precedes the auto-erotic activity of thumb-sucking. He now also admits that in the anal-sadistic phase “an extraneous object [is] already observable.” (198-199)

In order to complete our picture of infantile sexual life, we must also suppose that the choice of an object [as in puberty] has already frequently or habitually been effected during the years of childhood: that is to say, the whole of the sexual currents have become directed towards a single person in relation to whom they seek to achieve their aims. (199)

However, at this stage

the combination of the component instincts and their subordination under the primacy of the genitals have been effected only incompletely or not at all. (199)

Freud will later explicitly distance himself from this statement:

\begin{quote}
Since the original disposition is necessarily a complex one, the sexual instinct itself must be something put together from various factors[;] in the perversions it falls apart, as it were, into its components. (231)
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{355} The assumption of the existence of pregenital organizations of sexual life is based on the analysis of the neuroses, and without a knowledge of them can scarcely be appreciated. (199)

\textsuperscript{356} Fisher and Greenberg, who believe that there is a fair amount of experimental evidence in support of many Freudian doctrines, find very little evidence for Freud’s theory of different organizations of the libido that are traversed during infantile sexual development. (Fisher and Greenberg 1977: 399-401) I find myself in sympathy with their general conclusion:

While we have found little available evidence that would support Freud’s idea that there are precise oral, anal, Oedipal and genital phases in each individual’s development, we have uncovered information indicating that fantasies and attitudes linked to the psychological meanings Freud assigned to these phases do exist and have consequences for behavior predictable from his definitions of them. There do seem to be important psychological phenomena paralleling the major dimensions in his developmental theories. …

We do not, at this point, urge acceptance of his detailed developmental model. It remains to be seen whether his oral, anal and other labeled stages occur when they do or in the sequence he proposes—or, indeed, whether they should even be called stages. But we do regard the forces he associated with the various developmental phases as entering significantly into the average person’s life. … We can meaningfully think of the average person as having to master a series of problems or conflicts paralleling those Freud ascribes to the developmental time periods.
at the height of the course of development of infantile sexuality, interest in the genitals and in their activity acquires a dominating significance which falls little short of that reached in maturity. At the same time, the main characteristic of this ‘infantile genital organization’ is its difference from the final genital organization of the adult … the fact that, for both sexes, only one genital, namely the male one, comes into account. What is present, therefore, is not a primacy of the genitals, but a primacy of the phallus. (1923e—SE XIX: 142)

The predominance of the genitals also comes out in the following words:

The nature of these sexual manifestations [in childhood] was found to be predominantly masturbatory. (234)

This suggests that sexual activity in childhood is generally genital in nature, and then in an auto-erotic form. This pronouncement obviously supports our conclusion that infantile sexuality is predominantly genital. It is unclear to what extent it implies that infantile sexuality is predominantly auto-erotic; one could imagine that while overt sexual activity in this stage is auto-erotic, its mental side, and infantile sexual desire as well, could still be object-directed. Be that as it may, the mass of Freud’s pronouncements, and most of the material he discusses, make infantile sexuality both predominantly genital and predominantly object-directed.

THE PICTURE OF RELATIONS BETWEEN SUBJECT AND OBJECT IN THE THREE ESSAYS

Freud is thus far from convincing when he argues that infantile sexuality is essentially auto-erotic. This may sound promising for those wishing to entertain a rosier view of life than the one Freud offers us. However, inasmuch as Freud shows us that the subject does relate essentially to objects, the picture he paints holds little solace for those wishing to think of the relations between people as basically ethical and respectful of alterity.

We described the “popular opinion” referred to by Freud as a straw man that allows him to expound his views by demolishing it. Let us follow Freud’s example and construct a view of sexuality that affords maximum comfort for our wish to see it as spontaneously and essentially ethical, and respectful of alterity. Our whole account thus far, as well as the subsequent exposition of the picture of human relations given by the Three Essays shows that the Freudian view differs from this one on practically every point.

For anybody interested in theoretically or practically making the world safe for ethics, Freud’s theory has the advantage of inducing our respect for the sheer weight of the forces and mechanisms opposing behaviour that is ethically desirable. Freud’s essentially amoral account of sexuality and love throws many obstacles in the way of a Weltanschauung that would make sexuality intrinsically “loving”, “spiritual”, “other-directed”, “respectful of alterity”, “ethical”, “altruistic” and wholesome. As well as, more problematically, in the way of one that would make sexuality even potentially any of these things.
WHAT WOULD SEXUALITY BE LIKE IF A RESPECT FOR THE OTHER’S ALTERITY WERE INTRINSIC TO IT?

In the erotic relation an epiphany of the other occurs: the other appears in her absolute value and radical alterity. There is an awareness that the other will remain an irreducible “mystery.” “Discovery does not shed light.” The caress “does not know what it seeks.” “The pathos of love consists … in an insurmountable duality of beings; it is a relationship with what forever slips away. The relationship does not … neutralize alterity, but conserves it”. Sexual desire does not mould the other to answer to some pre-existing stereotype shaped out of the subject’s needs, ideas, values or past experiences. Rather, it awaits the other with complete openness—as it would an event that is as yet completely unimaginable. “Nothing is further from Eros than possession”; it “differs from possession and power.” “If one could possess, grasp and know the other it would not be the other.” Eros “is neither a struggle, nor a fusion, nor a knowledge”, but the relationship with alterity. Despite its passionate nature, the sexual relation is fundamentally ethical: “Wholly passion, it is compassion for the passivity, the suffering, the evanescence of the tender.”

BAD NEWS FOR ALTERITY: PARADIGMATIC RELATIONS BETWEEN SUBJECT AND OBJECT IN THE THREE ESSAYS

The preceding view was assembled by freely quoting and paraphrasing Levinas on the erotic. The aim was not to give a reliable summary of that thinker’s ideas, but to mine him for certain pronouncements—those that would make the erotic a field in which a successful recognition of the other’s alterity is the norm. Freud’s view of sexuality forms a marked contrast with the one

357 (Levinas 1969: 261-262)
358 (Levinas 1985: 68)
359 (Levinas 1969: 260)
360 (Levinas 1992: 51)
361 (Levinas 1985: 67)
362 Compare the following:

The caress consists in seizing upon nothing, in soliciting what ceaselessly escapes its form toward a future never future enough, in soliciting what slips away as though it were not yet. … Anticipation grasps possibilities; what the caress seeks is not situated in a perspective and in the light of the graspable. (Levinas 1969: 257-258)

363 (Levinas 1969: 265)
364 (Levinas 1992: 50)
365 (Levinas 1992: 51)
366 (Levinas 1992: 50)
367 (Levinas 1969: 259)
368 My initial intention of an extended comparison between Freud and Levinas on sexuality ran aground on the prima facie incommensurability of their positions; each is removed from common sense in his own

footnote ctd. on next page—
constructed here: where Levinas’s picture was one of success, Freud’s picture is characterised by the essential failure to recognise the alterity of the other.

**Object-choice, substitutability and repetition**

We have extensively discussed the substitutability of the object as essential to Freud’s view of sexuality. This is of course completely incompatible with any idea in which love, and specifically sexual love, would mean a relation in which the alterity (or even quiddity) of the other would be essential. Inasmuch as Freud dwells on the importance of the erotogenic zones, it would appear that the person who functions as sexual object is essentially a means to the end of sensual satisfaction in such a zone; similar emphases on the component instincts also suggest that the object has an (exclusively or mainly) instrumental value to the subject. Instead of the value being the other person, and then a means sought to relate to this value, the value lies in the aim, with the object being a means to attain it. The same goes for Freud’s model when we read it as ascribing to sexuality not a reproductive function, but the basically psychological one of reducing tension in the organism (p. 246). Below (p. 270) we shall see that Freud does recognise a phenomenon in which the (typically: male) subject attaches an extremely high value to the sexual object; he calls this “sexual overvaluation”. However, the terms in which he describes it are such as to deprive it of any Levinasian moral content (as is already suggested by his decision to refer to it with a phrase continuing the morpheme “over-”).

In all these cases the other in his or her alterity will tend to be a danger—even when also desired—because nothing limits him or her to tension-reducing behaviour. However, had sexuality (also) been conceived of in terms of adventure, curiosity and discovery, the alterity of the other would be intrinsic to what is desired, rather than (only) an unwelcome appendage to a mechanism that was sought for its tension-reducing, instinct-satisfying qualities.

Freud’s ubiquitous depiction of object-choices as attempts to refind previous love objects—especially primary ones—both confirms and undermines this picture.

Preparations for object-choice in puberty “have been made from earliest childhood.” (222) After an auto-erotic period there is a return to the original object-relatedness of sexuality:

---

way. To relate them to each other would be very interesting, but require much ingenuity and patience if justice is to be done to both.

369 To go into the how and why of this notion, its defensibility or not, would be to open a can of worms I would rather leave closed in the present context.
There are … good reasons why a child sucking at his mother’s breast has become the prototype of every relation of love. The finding of an object is in fact a refinding of it.

(222)

A subject who seeks compulsively for a repetition of previous love objects, and “thus to restore the happiness that has been lost” (222), will not be open to the countless respects in which later objects differ from the model she is trying to resurrect. (Even where new experiences are happy, they usually do not “restore the happiness that has been lost.”). Such differences will often not be noticed, or otherwise not appreciated.

On the other hand, Freud’s view here implicitly ascribes something like an intrinsic, non-instrumental value to the original object. Why would we be interested in refinding it, rather than finding another object that can satisfy our desires as well or better? The Three Essays already suggest an answer of sorts: our experiences of satisfaction shape our desires. But Freud’s account here suggests that they would be shaped in respect of their aims, rather than in respect of their object.

In a 1915 footnote, Freud labels an object-choice as “anaclitic” [Objektfindung … in Anlehnung] when it is “based on attachment to early infantile prototypes”, and says that psychoanalysis now also recognises a second type: “the narcissistic one, which seeks for the subject’s own ego and finds it again in other people.” (222n) (The narcissist kissing somebody else “seems to be saying”: “It’s a pity I can’t kiss myself.” (182)) Both types therefore involve a “refinding” of an object, a repetition, rather than essentially being open to something new. To the champions of alterity, neither option offers reason for rejoicing. Regardless of whether it is yourself or your mother you seek in her, your wife will be short-changed.

From Derrida we learn that repetition typically has the structure of iteration. That which is repeated is necessarily changed by the repetition. (As becomes especially evident when the same joke is told twice in succession). We will never be able to repeat anything exactly. Freud however

---

370 Bersani (1986: 35) remarks perspicaciously that “the entire teleological point of view is threatened” by this remark.

Those of us who pass the excruciating test of the phases of infantile sexuality, who manage to adjust hierarchically the component drives of orality and anality to the dominance of the genital, find themselves—if they are lucky in their objects—back at the very beginning of the whole process. “A child sucking at his mother’s breast has become the prototype of every relation of love”. (222) The end of the story is already in the beginning of the story; the teleological movement goes into reverse at the very moment when it reaches its goal; and the narrative line of sexuality completes itself as a circle.

371 Freud would only later explicitly come with the suggestion (in many ways more interesting, and today more characteristically psychoanalytic in its flavour) that we are inclined to repeat primary relations, regardless of whether they were satisfying or not.
speaks of the wish to repeat. Moreover, psychoanalysis is also highly interested in the way in which each recurrence of "the same" involves a shift; it usually does not represent repetition as proceeding mechanically:

Every object-choice ... is based, though less closely, on [the] prototypes [of the mother or father]. [in freier Anlehnung an diese Vorbilder] (228; GW 129)\(^{372}\)

Lest we dwell too much on repetition as a failure, it is important to emphasise the extent to which such repetitions also represent a real success, a crucial achievement. In them the subject stops demanding numerical identity regarding his or her love object—the mother herself, or the father himself—and accepts, instead, an identity or similarity in repetition—somebody like the parent.\(^{373}\) This form of repetition means that the subject obeys the prohibition against incest.\(^{374}\)

At the end of the "Summary", repetition—in this case of impressions concerning precocious sexual experiences—is however not presented as an unavoidable feature of sexual life. Only in some people are such impressions so “pertinacious” that they lead to a “fixation” in the form of a permanent disturbance. In that case these early impressions “tend in a compulsive manner towards repetition [and] lay down the path to be taken by the sexual instinct for a whole lifetime.” (242) An example would be fetishism. However, because the criteria for “fetishism” are still so wide, almost any specification of qualities you demand of a love object, beyond those simply prescribed by “normality”, can qualify as fetishistic. (n. 319) Repetition again threatens to become a universal feature of sexual life.

---

372 Another reason why the repetition is not mechanical, is that parents do not form the only prototype for object-choice:

Other starting-points with the same early origin enable a man to develop more than one sexual line, based no less upon his childhood, and to lay down very various conditions for his object-choice. (228-229)

Strachey’s “line” translates Reihe—series. A series can usually be extended in different ways, and if more than one series is involved, there are probably even more ways in which they can be extended. The danger here, however, is that the various series may “dictate” incompatible extensions: for instance, a degraded sexual object, and an exalted love object.

373 Or somebody like the sister. In a letter to Abraham (11.7.08), Freud remarks that when a man marries his cousin, she “often takes the place of a sister. I believe the prognosis in such marriages to be generally very favourable.” (1965a: 43)

374 Derrida and Wittgenstein moreover teach us to distrust the dichotomy “original”/“repetition”. If everything is constituted by repetition, difference and deferral—that is, by différence—then the so-called ‘original’ object is not the substantial origin of a series of repetitions, but itself constituted differentially and retroactively. And indeed, empirically, the mother necessarily has shorter or longer periods of absence, and invariably from the beginning is one of several persons in the infant’s world. The asymmetry which we have sketched between the ‘original’ object and its repetitions could then not be as absolute as Freud’s words suggest.
The typical relation to the object in cruelty and sadomasochism

The history of human civilization shows beyond any doubt that there is an intimate connection between cruelty and the sexual instinct. (159)

In the Three Essays … Freud clearly places cruelty—more specifically, sadism and masochism—at the heart of infantile sexuality. (Bersani 1986: 37)

Freud vacillates remarkably regarding the question how intrinsic cruelty is to sexuality. First cruelty, scopophilia and exhibitionism are described as (in childhood) “independent impulses, distinct in the first instance from erotogenic sexual activity.” (192) However, in a passage that was deleted from the 1915 and later editions, Freud soon speaks of “mutual influences which limit this presumed independence of the two sets of instincts.” (193n) Moreover, when Freud says that “[c]hildren who distinguish themselves by special cruelty towards animals and playmates usually give rise to a just suspicion of an intense and precocious sexual activity arising from erotogenic zones” (193) this suggests an intrinsic link between the two sets of instincts.

The notion of sadomasochism was not invented by Freud. Psychoanalysis is, however, an utterly congenial home for it. Freud usually treats the tendency to cruelty as a component of the sexual drive. If “sexuality” in Freud is supposed to have a scope comparable to Plato’s “Eros” (134), it is highly disturbing to discover that cruelty is an intrinsic part of it. Sadism, that is: cruelty, as a sine qua non for sexual satisfaction, is not a simple aberration, but part of the universal structure of human possibilities.

That people take pleasure in the pain, humiliation or subjugation of others (sadism) or themselves (masochism) is obviously highly relevant to our topic. Part of Freud’s implicit answer to the question: “Why do people denigrate others?” is therefore: “Because they get sexual pleasure out of it, and sometimes even because this is a necessary condition for them to get sexual pleasure at all.”

We have already seen that Freud takes “an element of aggressiveness—a desire to subjugate” (157) to be part of the “sexuality of most male human beings”.

The biological significance of it seems to lie in the need for overcoming the resistance of the sexual object by means other than the process of wooing. (158)

Or, to put it bluntly, this aggressiveness allows those who won’t be wooed, to be raped—or submitted to something intermediate between wooing and raping. Given the proximity of Freud’s ideal of normality to rape, this statement acquires an especially sinister ring. In itself, “an active or violent attitude to the sexual object”, which is sometimes also called sadism, does not constitute a perversion. Only “cases in which satisfaction is entirely conditional on the

---

375 The final footnote to chapter 4 of Civilization and its discontents will point in the same direction: “there is so often associated with the erotic relationship, over and above its own sadistic components, a quota of plain inclination to aggression.” (1930a—XXI: 99)
humiliation and maltreatment of the object” deserve this label. (158) Freud’s notion of normality is again very inclusive. Rape as such would apparently not count as perverse behaviour, except where this is the only form of sex that the rapist finds satisfying.376

Children have a “sadistic view of intercourse”:

If children at this early age witness sexual intercourse between adults … they inevitably regard the sexual act as a sort of ill-treatment or act of subjugation [Überwältigung; überwältigen—overpower]; they view it, that is, in a sadistic sense. (196: GW 97)

This view is likely to continue existing at some unconscious level in adults, in the same way that the infantile cloacal theory is not completely erased when the existence of the vagina is recognised. In any case, Freud claims that

an impression of this kind in early childhood contributes a great deal towards a predisposition to a subsequent sadistic displacement of the sexual aim. (196)

(Freud probably means: “in the male”).377

It is common to see the denigration and devaluation of the other approached from the concept of “prejudice”, which carries with it the reassuring idea that othering proceeds from a cognitive error—precipitate or premature judgements. (Pre-judice) If the person who denigrates could only know the victim better, his denigration would cease. (This of course already presupposes, optimistically, that a closer knowledge and unbiased perception of others will invariably reveal them as wholesome, loveable, or at least: deserving of respect).

Seeing sadism as a ubiquitous human possibility seems to require a very different approach. People do not only (or perhaps even mainly) denigrate others out of ignorance, nor are they cruel to them simply because an egoistic pursuit of their own aims makes them insensitive to the negative consequences this can have for others. (Another explanation that allows one to preserve

376 I find Freud’s silence on rape disturbing. Am I infected with late XXth Century political correctness? Is Freud simply a realist who knows that rape is one of the dreadful things that happen in this world of ours, and that sexual intercourse in other cases often is not so far removed from rape, either? Is rape indeed conceptually independent of perversion and neurosis, and does it, as such, fall outside the scope of the Three Essays? Or is this silence symptomatic of sexism (albeit an endemic one, in which Freud does not compare badly with his male contemporaries)? The fact that Freud interprets Dora’s disgust at Herr K’s forcible advances as a symptom of hysteria (a normal girl would have felt excited by it) makes me suspect that the latter alternative must at least be part of the truth:

I should without question consider a person hysterical in whom an occasion for sexual excitement elicited feelings that were preponderantly or exclusively unpleasurable. (1905e—SE VII: 28)

377 Will the greater exposure of children to depictions of intercourse in the media then lead to an increase in sadism in the general population (even if these depictions are not violent)? I would still need some convincing on this score.
a belief in the fundamental goodness of mankind). There is *erotic pleasure* involved in such cruelty. Moreover, *intimi* are the regular objects of much the same denigration as that to which strangers are subjected.

The notion of masochism posits that this pleasure in ill-treatment can also be found on the side of the object, who is ostensibly just the passive victim of the sadist’s maltreatment. Of course this notion must be used with circumspection: Hitler’s victims did not become his victims because of masochism. But, since masochism is as ubiquitous as sadism, it can in many cases serve to make the victims acquiesce in their denigration—or even provoke it. 378

The most remarkable feature of the perversion is that its active and passive forms are habitually found to occur together in the same individual. … A sadist is always at the same time also a masochist. (159)

This passage opens up an approach that to my knowledge is not commonly found in the discourse of alterity: that we should seek to discover the way in which the aggressor also occupies the position of victim, and vice versa—the way in which the two positions are connected by a system of channels, facilitating displacement between them. Kafka’s (1972) penal colony comes to mind: when the executioner is denied a victim, he submits himself to the execution machine. His allegiance to the continuing operations of the machine seems to lie deeper than his desire to occupy the position of executioner. To me this story has always seemed to represent some great psychological truth.

Sometimes masochism is a displacement of sadism, with the self as object:

> It can often be shown that masochism is nothing more than an extension of sadism turned round upon the subject’s own self, which thus, to begin with, takes the place of the sexual object. (158)

Freud later (1924) places this remark in a different context: this is an example of *secondary* masochism. It can be added to *primary* or *erotogenic* masochism, which is not a turning back of sadism onto oneself, and which can develop into two forms: *feminine* and *moral* masochism. (158n2) *Feminine* masochism is seen for instance in those “masochistic phantasies … that place the [male] subject in a characteristically female situation.” (SE XIX: 162) In *moral* masochism

---

378 I sometimes entertain the following notion: that people seek to extract what pleasure they can from whatever happens to them, especially if it is inescapable. (This would give survival value to masochism in a world that is in so many ways inhospitable to its denizens). This can easily lead to a psychoanalytic misreading: that the situation from which the subject tried to extract pleasure *ex post facto* was actually willed by her. On the other hand, there is often a gain from victimhood, similar to Freud’s primary and secondary gain from illness, that helps to perpetuate or induce victimhood. As with the gain from illness, it will often be extremely difficult to determine whether an apparently secondary gain was not actually a primary one.
“the subject, as a result of an unconscious sense of guilt, seeks out the position of victim without any sexual pleasure being directly involved.” (Laplanche and Pontalis 1973: 244)

The relation to the object in the various organisations of the libido

By the time of the 1924 edition of the *Three Essays*, Freud recognises two pregenital organisations (the “oral” and the “anal”), and two genital ones (the “phallic” and the “genital”). Freud’s grounds for asserting the existence of phases before the genital proper are largely indirect and theoretical; these phases are fictive.379 “It is only in pathological cases that they become active and recognizable to superficial observation.” (198) It is to be noted that Freud describes every single one of these phases as object-directed; the only qualification is that the various impulses involved need not all have the same object (something that will only be firmly in place by the final phase), and that certain component instincts continue to operate in an auto-erotic way. Note that non-convergence upon a single object is by no means the same as auto-erotic.

Oral or cannibalistic organisation

The sexual object here is the same as that of nutrition; the two functions are not yet clearly differentiated.

The sexual *aim* consists in the incorporation of the object—the prototype of a process which, in the form of identification, is later to play such an important psychological part. (198)380

Thumb-sucking, previously presented as paradigm for infantile sexuality in general, is here called a “relic” [Rest] of this phase, in which a part of the own body has taken the place of an external object. (198; GW 98)

Love in this phase is compatible with the object’s ceasing to exist as something independent. (Cf. p. 313) To incorporate something is to kill it, contrary to those fairy tales where the wolf’s belly is cut open, and the children or kids jump out alive. Analogically, we can expect those modes of relating to the other in which the other is mentally incorporated, to *kill* the alterity of the other.

379 Freud specifically refers to the oral phase as a “fictive” phase. [*fiktiv*—Strachey translates it as “constructed”] (198; GW 98)

380 Laplanche and Pontalis, commenting on this passage, also remark on the disjunction between this approach to the oral stage, and its initial thematisation as auto-erotic:

Freud introduces the term ‘incorporation’ while developing the notion of the oral stage; its use puts the emphasis on the relationship to the object, where formerly—notably in the first edition of the *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*—Freud had described oral activity from the relatively limited viewpoint of pleasure derived from sucking. (Laplanche and Pontalis 1973: 211)
Love in this phase can boil down to very much the same thing as hate. In 1920 Freud will admit as much:

During the oral stage of organization of the libido, the act of obtaining erotic mastery over an object coincides with that object’s destruction. (1920—SE XVIII: 54)

Identification, whether as oral incorporation or in some other form, obviously tends to deny the alterity and separateness of subject and object.

**Anal-sadistic organisation**

The two currents that will later become “male” and “female” at this stage still present themselves simply as “active” and “passive”.

The *activity* is put into operation by the instinct for mastery through the agency of the somatic musculature; the organ which, more than any other, represents the *passive* sexual aim is the erotogenic mucous membrane of the anus. (198)

The objects of these two currents are not identical.

Alongside these, other component instincts operate in an auto-erotic manner. In this phase, therefore, … an extraneous object [is] already observable. (198-199)

**Ambivalence.** Freud’s use of this term in the *Three Essays* (199) is somewhat unclear. It apparently refers to the anal-sadistic organisation of the libido, although it is as valid for the oral-cannibalistic phase which Freud had discussed immediately before it.

In it the opposing pairs of instincts are developed to an approximately equal extent, a state of affairs described by Bleuler’s … term ‘ambivalence’. (199)

It could here (as in 1915c—XIV: 131) refer only to the activity/passivity pair, or also to the more usual love/hate pair. In both cases the form taken by love becomes unstable.

Those advocating an ethics of love in the past have generally not conceived of love as something ambivalent—something that is regularly accompanied by hate, entwined with it, transformable into it, and sometimes even indistinguishable from it. Again Freud robs us of the idea of any unambiguous or non-ambivalent basis for ethics. Love and its other are too close to each other to

---

381 Freud’s later remarks on this topic in “Instincts and their vicissitudes” will be discussed below. (p. 314)

382 Does somebody become (sexually) passive because he has a preference for sensations in the anal zone? Or is penile penetration of the anus (inter alia) a symbol for the desired, tolerated or feared submission to the other (or subjugation of the other by oneself), as is often the case among primates? Is the male allowing himself to be (symbolically) penetrated by another male necessarily taking a feminine position? If so, does it necessarily express a wish to be feminine? Or could taking the feminine position be an instrumental move: presenting oneself as feminine to avoid (male) rivalry with a dominant male? (Psychoanalysis seems to presuppose, interestingly, that the transition between doing something instrumentally and doing it for its own sake is fluid; and that the former can lead to the latter).
allow us to unambivalently embrace love as a force that works unequivocally to make the world a more ethical place.

**Phallic organisation**

In this phase, which Freud only introduced in 1924, the male organ is ascribed to both sexes. “It knows only one kind of genital: the male one.” (200n) Sexual difference is denied; the other is presumed to be the same as the self.

It is self-evident to a male child that a genital like his own is to be attributed to everyone he knows, and he cannot make its absence tally with his picture of these other people.

(195)

Inasmuch as some sort of difference is acknowledged, it is seen as being one between castrated and uncastrated. “This phase … presents a sexual object and some degree of convergence of the sexual impulses upon that object.” (199n2)

**Genital organisation—“normality”**

This Valhalla of sexual development is left surprisingly undefined by Freud. The main issue discussed by Freud (mainly in his two ‘Contributions to the psychology of love’ (1910h & 1912d), rather than in the Three Essays), which addresses our topic apropos of the genital organisation, is that of the confluence, in the male, of “the affectionate” and “the sensual” currents. Normality can only be obtained when the objects of these two currents coincide. Where this fails, psychic impotence occurs: the subject is sexually potent, but only with a debased object, that is, an object that is not simultaneously loved.

Characteristically, Freud lays more stress on the non-attainment of this goal than on its attainment. By the end of his reflections psychic impotence has become well-nigh universal, in any case: in “civilised” men. However, before we discuss the debasement of the object, let us first investigate Freud’s discussion of what appears to be its diametrical opposite: the overvaluation of the object.

**Love and debasement**

**Being in love and overvaluation**

In the phenomenon of being in love [Verliebtheit], we find something that is at first sight utterly alien to the order of othering. According to Freud it is characteristic of being in love that the other is overvalued [überschätzt—overrated, overestimated], as opposed to devalued (viewed with contempt, debased, denigrated, etc.). Freud’s description of this overvaluation seems to be that of the cynical onlooker, not the person in love:

Only in the rarest instances [does] the psychical valuation that is set on the sexual object … stop[…] short at the genitals. The appreciation extends to the whole body of the sexual
object and … spreads over into the psychological sphere: the subject becomes, as it were, intellectually infatuated (that is, his powers of judgement are weakened) by the mental achievements and perfections of the sexual object and he submits to the latter’s judgements with credulity. (151)

This overvaluation is responsible for the fact that the sexual aim does not remain limited to the union of the genitals. Freud’s description almost gives the impression that an undeluded sexuality would only treasure the object’s genitals, and not let itself be diverted to foreplay! (This confinement to the genitals would simultaneously be the ultimate insurance against perversion).

The deluded lover is somebody who, unable to content himself with a nice piece of cunt\(^\text{383}\), has to make it part and parcel of a wonderful person. It is then not strange that Freud makes the degree of sexual overvaluation depend on the female’s resistance:

- The intensification of the brake upon sexuality brought about by pubertal repression in women serves as a stimulus to the libido in men and causes an increase of its activity.
- Along with this heightening of libido there is also an increase of sexual overvaluation which only emerges in full force in relation to a woman who holds herself back and denies her sexuality. (221; cf. also 1912d—SE XI: 187-188)

Sexual overvaluation could in its own way be said to deny the alterity or quiddity of the other \textit{as much as} the more “negative” ways of othering.\(^\text{384}\) Women for instance not only protest against being denigrated as whores; they often protest as vehemently against being idealised as Madonnas, with the slightest unpremeditated movement leading to a disastrous fall from their lofty pedestals. Indeed, it is a commonplace of feminism that the valuation of women as Madonnas or as whores belongs to one and the same dialectical movement.

**Does Freud treat love as an ethical force?**

*Being in love*, in Freud’s disenchanted description, hardly has anything to do with the ethical attitude of benevolence, caring and compassion\(^\text{385}\) with which the term “love” is associated in, for instance, Christian ethics. His description of being in love rather resonates with that strand in

---

\(^{383}\) Would calling a woman “a nice piece of cunt” then be a way of showing explicitly that overvaluation is absent?

\(^{384}\) Furthermore, even if the state of being in love (or: a sustained relation centring on sexual love) \textit{had} led to a form of respect for the loved one that could serve as paradigm for a non-othering attitude, it tends to be highly limited in its scope—notoriously, it tends to become an egoism (or narcissism) \textit{à deux}, instead of leading to a generalised altruism.

- The relationship established between lovers in voluptuosity … is the very contrary of the social relation. It excludes the third party, it remains intimacy, dual solitude, closed society, the supremely non-public. (Levinas 1969: 264-265)

\(^{385}\) Although Freud does mention \textit{Mitleid} [pity, sympathy, compassion] as a force opposing sadism, he does not present it as an aspect of love or ‘the affectionate current’, nor does he otherwise expand on it.
Greek (and later) philosophy that is suspicious of love. Does Freud’s notion of sexuality then include—or trench upon—the notion of love in some other, ethically positive sense? We have argued that the various forms of sexuality described by Freud by and large imply a relation to an object as a central characteristic; however, this relation does not often sound recognisably like the relation to a love-object. In the Three Essays there is hardly any attention to love (the need for

386 The notion that Eros might reinforce the human element in man does not appear in the pre-Platonic writers. (Boas 1967: 90)

Love is generally seen as a danger; a powerful impulse needing strict control. (Hesiod, for instance, still saw love as the enemy of reason—a position echoed in Freud’s words “powers of judgement are weakened” and “submits to … with credulity” in the quote on p. 271). When Empedocles links Aphrodite to peace and harmony, it is a major innovation, according to Boas. A later cynic about love is of course Schopenhauer (a not insignificant influence on Freud), who condemns all forms of love, and sees them all as rooted in sexuality.

387 It would be an interesting thesis if even these ‘perverted’ relations to the object, were presented as valid, full-blown examples of love.

Baby, take off your coat—real slow.
Baby, take off your shoe—get up, take your shoe.
Baby, take off your dress—yes, yes, yes.
You can leave your hat on.
Go on over there; turn on the light; lower the lights.
Come back here; stand on this chair—that’s right.
Raise your arms up into the air—shake ’em.
You give me reason to live.
Suspicious minds are talking.
They say that my love is wrong.
They don’t know what love is.
I know what love is. (Newman: 1972)

The ‘pervert’ is here claiming that his relation to his love object is love. Love does seem to get this interesting twist when Freud speaks of “the omnipotence of love” in the context of “the most repulsive perversions”:

It is perhaps in connection precisely with the most repulsive perversions that the mental factor must be regarded as playing its largest part in the transformation of the sexual instinct. It is impossible to deny that in their case a piece of mental work has been performed which, in spite of its horrifying result, is the equivalent of an idealization of the instinct. The omnipotence of love is perhaps never more strongly proved than in such of its aberrations as these. The highest and the lowest are always closest to each other in the sphere of sexuality. (161-162—my emphases)

In other words: the perversions show most clearly how far human love or sexuality is removed from being a phenomenon exclusively determined by biology. The sexual drive, with its characteristic indeterminacy of aim and object, is thus very different from the instincts in animals.

Why does Freud speak of “the omnipotence of love” and not “the omnipotence of sexuality”? What sort of love does he have in mind here? As examples of “the most repulsive perversions” he mentions

footnote ctd. on next page—
love and the tendency to love) in any sense other than that of bodily gratification, with the
remarks on psychical overvaluation and affection forming an exception.

Very little of what Freud says about love is even vaguely congruent with the role of love in
mainstream Judaeo-Christian ethics: God’s love as the model for an ethical attitude to others, or
the injunction “love thy neighbour as thyself” as the essence of ethics. On the contrary, in the
Three Essays Freud tends to be Freud the debunker, the master of suspicion, who like Nietzsche
acknowledges very little in sexual love that is conducive to an ethics of love. As such the Three
Essays form a necessary corrective to any view which assumes that an attitude of ethical, spiritual
love for the other is a common phenomenon, that is freely available to anyone with a modicum of
good will. We are led to conclude that Freud’s conception of love in the Three Essays is
fundamentally amoral. One advantage of this is that it allows for the separation of the descriptive
and the normative approaches to love.

Love is also central to another form of ethics that has fundamentally influenced Western
culture—Plato’s. In the 1920 “Preface” to the Three Essays, Freud seems to pride himself on
“how closely the enlarged sexuality of psycho-analysis coincides with the Eros of the divine
Plato.” (134) As applied to the Three Essays, this comparison is thoroughly misleading.

In Plato’s Symposium (1977) Socrates/Diotima presents love as the moral force par excellence.
Love is love of beauty:

> there is a scale of beauty, progressing from that of bodies, through that of forms, thoughts,
minds, institutions and laws, the sciences, to absolute or ideal beauty. … Sexual love itself,
although lowest on the scale of love, is nevertheless the seed of ideal love, since what
attracts a man to his beloved is beauty. (Boas 1967: 90)

By the time of the 1920 Preface, Freud had developed his dualism of Eros and Thanatos, which
was a far cry from the position found in the Three Essays. Whatever the degree of similarity
between Freud’s Eros (in 1920) and Plato’s ethically coloured Eros may be, there is very little in
the Three Essays (of 1905, or even of 1924) that agrees with the latter. The sexual as described
here can hardly be said to contain within itself the seed of ethical or spiritual love. Even a cursory

“licking excrement” and “intercourse with dead bodies”. What would it mean to see these activities
as expressions of love? It seems that “love” here should be glossed as: that which binds the subject to
the object; an amoral conception of love that seems to be quite far removed from a normative use of
the term “love”—“love” as part of sexual normality—where the affectionate current (or its
confluence with the sensual current) would be essential.

Gay (1988: 149) remarks wryly:

> When it suited him, Freud, the positivist and principled anti-metaphysician, did not mind claiming a
philosopher for an ancestor.
investigation of Plato’s views on love shows that Plato also does not supply a connection through which love in Freud’s 1905 account would become an ethical force of any importance.

However, let us first investigate the little that Freud does say about “love”, “affection”, “the affectionate current” and “debasement” more closely.

**Love, affection and debasement**

A child sucking at his mother’s breast has become the prototype of every relation of love. The finding of an object is in fact a refinding of it. (222)

The unpromising consequences of the last sentence for the recognition of the (later) love object’s alterity have already been discussed above. (p. 263) Those who supply the infant’s needs, become love objects.

Children learn to feel for other people who help them in their helplessness and satisfy their needs a love which is on the model of, and a continuation of, their relations as sucklings to their nursing mother. (222-223)

The cynical, and probably correct, interpretation of this statement is that we love those who (help us) satisfy our needs. Love would then be a purely instrumental (egoistic, selfish) matter. This does not leave much scope for the awareness of, and appreciation for, alterity in love.389

Freud proceeds to identify this love—the “child’s affection and esteem for those who look after him[—]with sexual love.” (223) He argues that the child’s love for the mother is sexual mainly because her love for it is sexual:

This is especially so since the person in charge of him, who, after all, is as a rule his mother, herself regards him with feelings that are derived from her own sexual life: she strokes him, kisses him, rocks him and quite clearly treats him as a substitute for a complete sexual object. (223)

Whether something is to count as sexual for the subject, here clearly depends on whether it is that for the other. The criteria for the sexual are not located in the private sensations of the infant, but in its relation with an other to whom this relation is sexual.

Freud adds that the mother should not reproach herself when her love for the child is sexual in this sense, because she thereby helps “him” (the paradigmatic infant is male) to develop in the way he should—that is, as long as her affection is not excessive. Sexuality in this case is thus conducive to an ethics of caring (as an integral aspect of ‘love’)—to care for a child is after all to give it what it needs to develop properly.

---

389 An interpretation with somewhat less bleak moral implications would be that we feel gratitude towards those who satisfy our needs, and that love is related to this. However, nothing in Freud’s text seems to prescribe the latter reading, according to which we could love even those who can no longer satisfy our desires.
Freud’s (scant) references to “affection” [Zärtlichkeit] and “the affectionate current” [die zärtliche Strömung], many of which only date from the 1915 edition, are probably the closest he comes to thematising love in the ordinary sense. Even this term in German has a very close link with the erotic, far more than the term “affection” in the English translation would suggest. Zärtlichkeit can be translated as affection, tenderness or caress. “Affection” itself would in most contexts not be translated with Zärtlichkeit, but with Zuneigung or Liebe. (Collins 1991) The Zärtlichkeit that Freud dualistically opposes to the component instincts, erogogenic zones, etc., itself thus has sensual connotations; the German is more conducive to the collapse of this dualism than is the English. (See note 393) It is also more suited to Freud’s conviction that an affectionate [zärtliche] attachment to the parents should stand in the way of a sexual attachment to a partner (227-228), and that parents’ excessive affection can have the effect of sexualising the child precociously. (223)

In the Three Essays, Freud is however surprisingly unspecific about the nature of affection and its manifestations. In the preceding pages, we have already quoted or paraphrased all the passages in which he refers to it in the original 1905 edition. In what follows, we therefore choose to discuss Freud’s more extensive treatment of this topic in his two “Contributions to the psychology of love”. (1910h and 1912d) These form the basis of two 1915 additions to the Three Essays in which “the affectionate current” is mentioned. (200 & 207) We start by discussing the second of the two “Contributions”: “On the universal tendency to debasement in the sphere of love.” (1912d) In it, “affection” is related to “psychical valuation” or “overvaluation” in such a way that “overvaluation” now sounds like a virtue to be applauded, and not an (occasion for) error, illusion or delusion to be deplored, as it did in the passages discussed above, which date from the original edition of the Three Essays.391

390 Freud himself speaks of the “excessive affection” of “neuropathic parents, who … are precisely most likely by their caresses [Liebkosungen] to arouse the child’s disposition to neurotic illness.” (223; GW 125)

391 ‘Overvaluation’ is then perhaps an infelicitous term. It is as if Freud acknowledges no other way to value a person highly, than to overvalue her, that is, to have a factually incorrect perception of her. Now, this may be common, or even the rule, and this in itself would already be a highly significant fact, that should give pause for thought. Nevertheless, I do not see a conceptual necessity here. If a doctor, from a respect for human life, fights to save the life of somebody said to represent ‘the dregs of society’, need he ‘overvalue’ that person in the sense of attributing to him “achievements and perfections”(151) that he does not in fact possess? Is respect necessarily dependent on believing certain empirical facts about the person respected to be true? Similarly in Freud’s discussion debasement seems to be linked simply to certain beliefs about certain empirical facts about the woman who is its object. He seems to be trying to flatten ought into is—a recurrent problem, but perhaps also a central strength, in his approach. (A strength because in the end it is likely that the phenomena of valuation are facts which one can try to account for psychologically, just as one would for any other facts). We could also ask what the norm is against which
A normal sexual life is only assured by an exact convergence of the affectionate current and the sensual currents both being directed towards the sexual object and the sexual aim. (1905d—SE VII: 207)

In the course of the three texts under discussion, the relation between these two currents becomes extremely problematic. Sexuality is so deeply involved with the affectionate current (and vice versa) that it becomes hard to distinguish them from each other. At first we are told that of the two currents, the affectionate one is the older. It develops on the basis of the self-preservative instincts and is directed at family and other caretakers—the child’s primary object-choices. From the beginning there is some sensual admixture in the affectionate current, especially because of the said sexual component in how others approach the infant. (1912d—SE XI: 180-181) By being combined with the affectionate current, the sensual current itself is “diverted from its sexual aims”. (1912d—SE XI: 181) However, being so powerful, the sensual current that joins in during puberty “no longer mistakes its aims”. Because of the barrier against incest that has meanwhile been erected, an ersatz object must be found to replace the original ones.

These new objects will be chosen on the model … of the infantile ones, but in the course of time they will attract to themselves the affection that was tied to the earlier ones. A man shall leave his father and mother … and shall cleave unto his wife; affection and sensuality are then united. The greatest intensity of sensual passion will bring with it the highest psychical valuation of the object—this being the normal overvaluation of the sexual object on the part of a man. (181)

Here sexual overvaluation does not seem limited to (a passing phase of?) being in love, but to the relation with the sexual object as such.

‘overvaluation’ and ‘debasement’ are measured. Isn’t Freud presupposing, as a concealed premise, the existence of something like respect for the dignity of persons?

As often in deciding whether something is to count as sexual or not, Freud’s decision that the affectionate current is not essentially sexual, smacks of arbitrariness. Cf. note 393, below.

In a 1915 addition to the Three Essays, Freud gives a different account: the affectionate current is what remains at puberty of the now repressed, but originally sexual feelings for the original (sexual) object. Their sexual aims have become mitigated and they now represent what may be described as the ‘affectionate current’ of sexual life. … [B]ehind this affection, admiration and respect there lie concealed the old sexual longings of the infantile sexual component instincts which have now become unserviceable. (200)

Sceptics may say that this is an elaborate construction to safeguard Freud’s thesis of infantile sexuality.

This is in marked contrast with those passages dating back to the original edition of the Three Essays, where the child’s affection is identified with sexual love—cf. p. 275.

In his remarks on ‘being in love’ [Verliebtheit], Freud perhaps does not mean to refer to a passing phase of infatuation. In any case, he is apparently not referring to it in the following passage on adults who feel excessive affection for their parents:
If circumstances make actual sexual relations with the *ersatz* object impossible and the original objects continue to exercise a powerful attraction, the confluence of sensuality and affection will be threatened. The result can be impotence or *psychic impotence*—a state in which the subject is capable of sexual relations, but only where his sexual object is not simultaneously his object of affection.

The sensual current that has remained active seeks only objects which do not recall the incestuous figures forbidden to it; if someone makes an impression that might lead to a high psychical evaluation of her, this impression does not find an issue in any sensual excitation but in affection which has no erotic effect. … Where [such people] love they do not desire and where they desire they cannot love. (182-183)

(Freud here seems to use “love” and “affection” as two different terms for *love seraphic*—non-sexual love).

The main protective measure against such a disturbance which men have recourse to in this split in their love consists in a psychical *debasement* of the sexual object, the overvaluation that normally attaches to the sexual object being reserved for the incestuous object and its representatives. (183)

We cannot escape the conclusion that the behaviour in love of men in the civilized world to-day bears the stamp altogether of psychic impotence. There are only a very few educated people in whom the two currents of affection and sensuality have become properly fused; the man almost always feels his respect for the woman acting as a restriction on his sexual activity, and only develops full potency when he is with a debased sexual object; and this in its turn is partly caused by the entrance of perverse components into his sexual aims, which he does not venture to satisfy with a woman he respects. (185)

“Respect” thus seems to be the core of what Freud calls “affection” or “love”. However: *

> Anyone who is to be really free and happy in love must have surmounted his respect for women* and have come to terms with the idea of incest with his mother or sister. Anyone who subjects himself to a serious self-examination on the subject of this requirement will be sure to find that he regards the sexual act basically as something degrading, which defiles and pollutes not only the body. (186—my emphases)

(This “low opinion” goes back to the person’s youth in which his sensual current, although already strong, was prohibited satisfaction, for any object, incestuous or otherwise).

The italicised words seem to clash directly with the passage quoted previously, according to which the

---

*Psycho-analysis has no difficulty in showing persons of this kind that they are in love [verliebt], in the everyday sense of the word, with these blood-relations of theirs. (228; GW 129)*
greatest intensity of sensual passion will bring with it the highest psychical valuation of the object—this being the normal overvaluation of the sexual object on the part of a man,

(181)

We now have two conflicting accounts: the greatest sensual pleasure is obtained with a debased sexual object—an association with sexuality debases the object; the greatest sensual pleasure is obtained with a respected sexual object—sexual passion leads to an overvaluation of the object.

The exemplar for affection and respect is the mother or sister—both of whom are taboo sexual objects. The exemplar for a sexual object is, apparently, a whore (cf. 183)—the archetypal opposite of a woman deserving respect and love. Normality again demands that the male achieve the almost impossible: either to find a whore who will fully satisfy his sexual needs, and simultaneously respect her like his (sexually taboo) mother or sister, or to find somebody he loves and respects like a mother or sister, and simultaneously desire her like a whore.

Freud’s account of the optimal conditions for maximal sexual satisfaction in the male is thus full of contradictions, apparent or real. Where will “the greatest intensity of sensual passion” occur? With a woman who is given “the highest psychical evaluation”? (181) Or when the male is “really free and happy in love”, i.e. has “surmounted his respect for women”? (186) Is Freud simply careless, or are his formulations paradoxical because male sexuality is itself paradoxical in this way? It seems as if male sexuality is essentially unstable between overvaluation and undervaluation.

Freud is also undecided as to the extension of the group for which the debasement of the woman is a condition for full sexual satisfaction. Is it an isolated group of male neurotics suffering from psychic impotence, as his initial account (and 1910b) would suggest? Or is a much larger group affected by it—almost all “men in the civilized world”, with the exception of “only a very few … people in whom the two currents of affection and sensuality have become properly fused”? (185) Or is this even a universal of male sexuality: “Anyone” who wants to be happy in love must overcome his respect for women; “anyone” who examines himself honestly must admit that he finds sex vile. The distinction between neurosis and normality seems to have disappeared—the previously normal is now (practically) non-existent. Freud’s assumptions have also become wildly implausible: if the sexual act is intrinsically defiling, why should the overvaluation of the object be “normal” in the male? (With this term Freud seems to be referring not to an ideal, but to what is usually the case).

396 We are reminded of Freud’s pronouncement in the Three Essays: the sexual instinct is opposed by resisting forces such as disgust, but “in its strength enjoys overriding this disgust.” (152; cf. p. 244)

397 Bersani would perhaps see the instability of Freud’s model of sexuality here as his very way of being true to the utter mobility—and therefore alterity—of sexuality.
“Average uncultivated women” and prostitutes

I should perhaps not have divulged immediately what the reader of Freud’s text realises only gradually: that the exemplar of the debased woman is the whore [Dirne], and that the debasement being referred to here should be understood in this sense. The Dirne is a woman who is prepared to engage in any sexual act with anybody. (As Strachey points out (1910h—SE XI: 167n), the prostitute in the strict sense of somebody who sells sex for money hardly seems to enter into it, although this is exactly the category under which the male places the female who does not limit her sexual favours or enjoyments to him). Before continuing with Freud’s text on debasement (1912d), let us go back to the Three Essays to investigate the strange things he says there about prostitutes.

In a curiously undecided passage (1905d—SE VII: 191), children, the average uncultivated female [das unkultierte Durchschnittsweib (GW 92)], prostitutes and “the immense number of women … who must be supposed to have an aptitude for prostitution without becoming engaged in it” (191) are all singled out as having a polymorphously perverse disposition, which seems to be (part of) the essence of prostitution. (The gradually expanding extension of the term referred to here reminds one of the gradual extension of the disposition to debasing the sexual object in the male). Freud says that seduction can bring out this disposition; seduction then becomes more like a Socratic midwifery than a violation of something to which perversion is foreign; what happens is simply that an intrinsically wanton disposition is activated. Freud therefore others a multiplicity of traditionally othered groups with one stroke of the pen, so to speak. Women tend to prostitution; uneducated women even more; whores realise not only their own fundamental nature, but also this fundamental female possibility. However, determined to have two thinks, Freud concludes from all this that the “disposition to perversions of every kind is a general and fundamental human characteristic”. (191) It is hard to lay one’s fingers on what it actually is that makes Freud’s procedure here so dubious. Without naming the structure of his argument, let me therefore construct an analogue to it:

- Danes are inclined to perversions of every kind

---

398 Strachey (1910h—SE XI: 167n) points out that Freud’s German term Dirne is hard to translate satisfactorily; I alternatively use “prostitute” as the technical term; “whore” as the name for an archetype, and “slut”, the common pejorative term for a woman considered too free with her sexual favours.

399 Freud’s views on prostitution were probably influenced by Weininger (reference to Gilman (1981) in Macmillan 1991: 295), who, in the words of Wittgenstein’s biographer Ray Monk (1991: 22) analyses women in terms of two … Platonic types: the mother and the prostitute. Each individual woman is a combination of the two, but is predominantly one or the other. [T]he prostitute[…] desire[s] to make love to every man she sees. (Weininger will have nothing to do with any explanation of prostitution based on social and economic conditions. Women are prostitutes, he says, because of the ‘disposition for and inclination to prostitution’ which is ‘deep in the nature of women’.)
• Jews are inclined to perversions of every kind
• The appropriate kind of seduction can lead Danes and Jews to act on this inclination, to acquire a taste for such acts and to make a habit of them
• People of mixed descent are inclined to perversions of every kind
• An “immense number” of people will under appropriate circumstances turn out to be of mixed descent
• Therefore the “disposition to perversions of every kind is a general and fundamental human characteristic”.

The “disposition to perversions of every kind” has become especially suspect by being linked to groups that are already the object of othering (Jews and “people of mixed descent”), while Danes, Jews and “people of mixed descent” have all been (further) tainted by being singled out as having this disposition. When in the conclusion (which, as in Freud, does not follow from the premises) the disposition is suddenly universalised, this does not purify it of the taint that it acquired in previous steps of the argument. (Nor does the ambiguous role of the seducer succeed in making of the seducee an originally untainted victim).

In the case of Freud, this means that the abjection of uneducated women, prostitutes and women in general has been reinforced: they are fair game for anybody wanting to use them sexually, if need be for “perversions of every kind”, as such use will only activate their intrinsic essence (Freud’s way of lumping these categories together elides the boundaries between them, and makes them share one and the same essence. The seducer initiating a woman into perversion can see himself as just the nth enjoyer of something that already was perverse). The woman as sinful temptress has become the woman as licentious pervert.

Debasement, the mother and the whore

For more on the nature of the debasement of the sexual object that a certain type of male neurotic finds a necessary condition for sexual desire, we turn to the first of Freud’s two

400 The role ascribed to the seducer could well be an inconsistent hangover from Freud’s earlier seduction theory.
401 The strange rhetorical structure of this passage in Freud also allows for another reading: by generalising from what could otherwise appear to be a limited group, everybody is othered, while the previously othered groups are de-othered. Perhaps there is some truth to this reading as well.
402 Moreover, Freud’s disturbing remarks about how the pertinacity of the libido is related to social and cultural hierarchies can act to reassure the seducer of a child from a ‘lower’ class (servants) or culture (that of one of the colonised countries) that he is not likely to do much harm:

the course taken by the sexual life of a child is just as unimportant for later life where the cultural or social level is relatively low as it is important where that level is relatively high. (1905d—SE VII: 242)
“Contributions”—“A special type of choice of object made by men”. (1910h—SE XI: 163-175) Freud here discusses various strange, but typical conditions that the male neurotic imposes on the choice of a love object.

One of these, which is linked to suspect or despicable moral behaviour on the part of the object, essentially in matters sexual, Freud terms

rather crudely ‘love for a prostitute’ [Dirnenliebe]. (166; GW 68)

This … precondition is to the effect that a woman who is chaste and whose reputation is irreproachable never exercises an attraction which might raise her to the status of a love-object, but only a woman whose fidelity and reliability are open to some doubt. (166; GW 68)

In other words: only a debased woman. In his second “Contribution”, Freud formulates it thus:

As soon as the condition of debasement [Erniedrigung is fulfilled, sensuality can be freely expressed, substantial sexual functioning becomes possible, and intense pleasure develops. (GW 8: 83; partly my translation—cf. SE XI: 183)

This type of neurotic needs a woman about whom he can be jealous.404

403 A second type of neurotic men seek their love objects among what are perceived to be sluts; they have the urge to ‘rescue’ the woman they love. The man is convinced that she is in need of him, that without him she would lose all moral control and rapidly sink to a lamentable level. … In some individual cases the idea of having to rescue her can be justified by reference to her sexual unreliability and the dangers of her social position: but it is no less conspicuous where there is no such basis in reality. (168—my emphases, except for “rescue”)

Regarding the first type of neurotic, Freud had also emphasised that there may be little objective justification for the fact that the subject experiences his love object in this way.

404 Girard (1978) would say that this is but a special case of our general inability to desire anything or anybody, except if already desired by somebody else. From Girard’s perspective, it would not be surprising that Freud finds himself compelled to expand, step by step, a category that was initially supposed to apply to a limited group of male neurotics, till it finally comprises all men. None of us is exempt from the fact that if we are to desire, the other’s desire must first of all come to our aid.

An unnamed French female analyst once claimed that what men seek in whores is their predecessors’ penis. (Personal communication by Harry Stroeken, 30 Oct. 1997). For the male, many a sexual relation to a female is also (or primarily) a sexual relation to another male.

Freud himself had dreams and screen memories in which a central feature was the sharing of a female between himself and other males. Examples are the dream of Irma’s injection (1900a—SE IV: 107ff) and Freud’s memory (recounted in ‘Screen memories’ (1899a—SE III: 311ff) as someone else’s) of himself, with another boy, ‘de-flowering’ a little girl. It is telling that Freud refuses to see any phantasy content (i.e.: wish-fulfilment) in the fact that he was not alone when de-flowering the girl (318-319); because of this he is convinced that we here indeed have an example not of a simple phantasy, but of a screen memory containing elements (such as this one) dating back from a real event.
In normal love the woman’s value is measured by her sexual integrity, and is reduced by any approach to the characteristic of being like a prostitute. Hence the fact that women with this characteristic are considered by men of our type to be *love-objects of the highest value* seems to be a striking departure from the normal. (167)

Freud traces these (and other) preconditions back to an “infantile fixation of tender feelings on the mother.” (168-169) This seems to deny the obvious:

The adult’s conscious thought likes to regard his mother as a person of unimpeachable moral purity; and there are few ideas which he finds so offensive when they come from others, or feels so tormenting when they spring from his own mind, as one which calls this aspect of his mother into question. This very relation of the sharpest contrast between ‘mother’ and ‘prostitute’ will however encourage us to enquire into the history of the development of these two complexes and the unconscious relation between them, since … what, in the conscious, is found split into a pair of opposites often occurs in the unconscious as a unity. (170)

The discovery that the mother has a—per definition disgusting—sexual relationship with the father places her on a par with the prostitute, whose existence is discovered at more or less the same time, and who is at first viewed not with contempt but “with a mixture of longing and horror.” (171)

He tells himself with cynical logic that the difference between his mother and a whore is not after all so very great, since basically they do the same thing. (171)

The sharp contrast between the paradigmatic exemplar of purity, the mother, and her paradigmatic opposite, the whore, crumbles. “Under the dominance of the Oedipus complex” the boy comes to desire his mother, a desire that can only be acted out in phantasy. If the mother is a whore prepared to do any sexual act with anybody, then she is also available for incest with her son.

He does not forgive his mother for having granted the favour of sexual intercourse not to himself but to his father, and he regards it as an act of unfaithfulness. (171)

When the boy has phantasies in which his mother is unfaithful to his father, the mother’s lover—the beneficiary of this infidelity—is but a guise for himself. The mother is thus ambiguously

One could also attach other interpretations, Girardian or non-Girardian, to the figure of a female sexual object being shared with other males: it could for instance be seen as a way of avoiding the rivalry with other males that is otherwise likely to attach to the ‘possession’ of a female.

In this context Freud discusses the phantasy of giving one’s mother a child as constituting an *identification* with the father, and thus expressing “the single wish to be his own father.” (173) The incestuous phantasy would abolish alterity, and, thereby, the identity of the self. (For Lacan the father is the function that introduces the subject to alterity).
suspended between being experienced as a Madonna and a whore. Because of the unity of opposites in the unconscious, these two alternatives are not mutually exclusive.

We can now better understand Freud’s categorical, but contradictory, pronouncements in the 1912 paper: he has not managed to pull off the difficult trick of finding a form that captures the contradictory undecidability of these high/low, Madonna/whore oppositions; in other words a form that is true to the unconscious by remaining suspended between both terms of each pair. Freud therefore alternates between coming down on one or the other side of the divide, instead of avoiding such categorical statements altogether. He reverts to treating the mother/whore opposition which he has deconstructed—“the difference … is not after all so very great” (171)—as if it were still an intact opposition, a “relation of the sharpest contrast”. (170)

In reading Freud’s remarks on ‘debasement’ I was initially puzzled by the question how this term should be glossed. What specific form of othering does he have in mind here? The short answer is: a debased sexual object is one which lacks “sexual integrity”, that is, an object approaching the paradigm of the whore. However, when one attempts to make a schematic overview of the terms that Freud uses to designate ‘overvaluation’ with its cognates, on the one hand, and ‘debasement’ with its cognates, on the other, and then looks at dictionary and thesaurus glosses on each of the terms thus obtained, a branching occurs. Although the opposition mother/whore remains central, a wide range of terms typical of othering, with its polarisation of reality into what is ‘high’ and what is ‘low’, ‘pure’ and ‘polluted’, etc., is compressed in it. (All references are to SE XI—the two “Contributions”—unless otherwise indicated).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DEBASED, FALLEN LOW</th>
<th>OVERVALUED, ELEVATED, ON HIGH</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(whore—object lacking “sexual integrity”; pollution)</td>
<td>(Madonna—object with “sexual integrity”; purity)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**FREUD’S TERMINOLOGY**

| “undervaluation after he has possessed her” (186) | “respect”—verb (185) |
| “surmount … respect” (186); for this a “woman who is ethically inferior, to whom he need attribute no aesthetic scruples” is needed; “woman of a lower class” (185)—possibly attractive because she is seen as meeting these conditions. | “well-brought-up wife” (185) |
| “mental achievements and perfections” (1905d—SE VII: 151) | |
**Dirne**: prostitute/whore/harlot/wanton/slut; woman of ill repute, woman of easy virtue  
“lose all moral control and rapidly sink to a lamentable level” (168)  
*Dirnenhaftigkeit*: whorishness; “being like a prostitute” (168; GW 8: 70)  
“women who practise sexual intercourse as a means of livelihood, and who are for this reason held in general contempt.” (171)  
“regards the sexual act … as something *degrading*, which *defiles* and *pollutes* not only the body.” (186)

| “woman whose fidelity and reliability are open to some doubt” (166) | “woman who is chaste and whose reputation is irreproachable” (166) |
| “her sexual unreliability” (168) | “woman who holds herself back and denies her sexuality” (1905d—SE VII: 221) |
| “unfaithfulness” of mother in giving sexual favours to father, rather than son (171) | |

**Glosses on this term**

| ‘debase’⁴⁰⁶: degrade, cheapen, contaminate, devalue, taint, spoil | Antonyms of ‘debase’: elevate, exalt, uplift, purify (all these can be read as glosses on “overvalue”) |
| ‘debased’: degraded, polluted, lowered, fallen, low, sordid, vile, depraved | Antonyms of ‘debased’ (=± glosses on “overvaluation”): chaste, decent, ethical, good, honourable, incorruptible, innocent, moral, pure, upright, virtuous |

| ‘degrade’: dishonour, pervert, reduce to inferior rank | Antonyms of ‘degrade’ (=± glosses on “overvaluation”): dignify, elevate, ennoble, enhance, honour, raise |
| ‘degraded’: base, despicable, disgraced, disreputable, dissolute, mean, vicious, amoral, dirty, abject, shameful |

**Freud’s surprising lack of surprise**

I am surprised by the force and the range of terms of condemnation that, in Freud’s account, are heaped on any woman who is not exclusive in her sexual relations.⁴⁰⁷ How strange that the terms

---

⁴⁰⁶ The German term is ‘erniedrigen’, which branches in a way very similar to ‘degrade’: erniedrigen: herabsetzen, herunterziehen, niedriger machen, geringschätzig, kränkend behandeln. (Wahrig 1989)

⁴⁰⁷ If the prostitute really *is* a prostitute, why be outraged that you are not the only one who can buy her favours? The rage (and the attraction) seem to be linked to the potential movement between the pole of “mother/wife” and that of “prostitute”.
in which such behaviour is judged are presented as unquestionable indices of her absolute value, moral and otherwise! (“In normal love the woman’s value is measured by her sexual integrity” (167).)

From our late XXth Century vantage point, Freud seems surprisingly unsurprised at the asymmetries in evidence here. Outside fundamentalist circles, a man who is polygamous, not chaste, not a virgin bridegroom, in a word: unfaithful or unreliable in matters sexual, is not seen as ‘fallen’, ‘impure’, tainted in his very being, not deserving respect, cheapened, abject or shameful in any comparable way. Neither is all this encapsulated by comparing him to a male prostitute. In other words: in contrast to what is the case with women, the whole register of othering terms does not become applicable to him just because of this.

Freud is actually unclear about whether debase ment precludes overvaluation (is this how the words “surmounted respect for women” (1912d—186) should be read?), is compatible with it, or is even conducive to it:

> In normal love the woman’s value is reduced by any approach to the characteristic of being like a prostitute. Hence the fact that women with this characteristic are considered by men of our type to be love-objects of the highest value seems to be a striking departure from the normal. (1910h—167)

As Freud later (1912d) apparently expands “men of our type” to include, firstly, almost all civilised men, and, subsequently, “anyone”, it appears that overvaluation and undervaluation of whores are not stable, exclusive options, but aspects of a single syndrome characterised by contradictory combinations and protean changes of aspect. By Freud’s account, the attitude he ascribes to boys would also be that of men: they do not view whores with unambiguous contempt, but “with a mixture of longing and horror.” (1910h: 171) All men love whores, and all men despise them; all men want their love objects to be whores, and all men want their love objects to be the opposite of whores. Freud’s account does not make explicit its implicit tenor: that men are essentially ambivalent about whores, and therefore about women. As for women⁴⁰⁸, Freud’s description of the double bind in which they find themselves insufficiently captures the impossible position they are placed in:

> ⁴⁰⁸ Freud had previously remarked that in women there is little sign of a need to debase their sexual object. This is no doubt connected with the absence in them as a rule of anything similar to the sexual overvaluation found in men. (186)

According to Freud, in women a condition for satisfying sexual experiences is often that they should be forbidden, in much the same way as the debasement of the object functions as a condition in men. I suspect that such a schematic distinction between the two sexes needs to be qualified considerably. If society does not see men as debased when they are sexually unreliable, this does not leave (heterosexual) women much scope for preferring debased sexual objects, in this sense. Conversely, will men not, because of the Oedipus complex, often be compulsively drawn to women who, like their mothers, are forbidden sexual objects?
It is naturally just as unfavourable for a woman if a man approaches her without his full potency as it is if his initial overvaluation of her when he is in love gives place to undervaluation after he has possessed her [nach der Besitzergreifung—after seizing possession]. (1912d—186; GW 86)

We are given no account of the individual, social and cultural practices in which this “psychical” overvaluation and debasement are embodied. If men would have utterly private phantasies, this would be one thing. But there are, firstly, practices turning women into Madonnas (or construing them as such, or demanding that they be Madonnas), simultaneous with other practices turning them into whores (or construing them as such), and, secondly, practices in which they are simultaneously or alternatively reproached for not being Madonnas, or whores, that is: not freely available to the particular male subject who happens to be in the position of the “I” viewing the particular woman from the perspective of his desires, for any act he happens to favour. (To demand that somebody be something, is simultaneously to push them in that direction, and to reproach them if they resist, or, alternatively, try and fail).

Freud shows no surprise at the massive moral condemnation precipitated by 1) sexual behaviour 2) of a certain sort. Why should sexual behaviour be so defining for one’s worth or worthlessness as a person? Why does this sexual behaviour elicit so much condemnation? If we take it as read that the male subject tends to find such behaviour painful, we can see that ascribing the behaviour to the woman, and blaming it on her Dirnenhaftigkeit (whorishness), is a way of avoiding other construals of the situation. The raison d’être of denigrating women as whores can be precisely to avoid seeing oneself as deficient (absolutely, or compared to the successful rivals) and to avoid acknowledging the fact of male rivalry or immorality. One of the big advantages to men (and perhaps disadvantages to women) of the norm of sexual exclusivity that is applied to women is the fact that, once the male has legitimately “seized possession” of the woman, he need not constantly prove or demonstrate his worth to her, in an open competition with all comers. She is not a free subject, but belongs to him, and all other men must respect his property rights over her.

One of the main anchors keeping such a system in place is the threat that the woman will count as a whore with no moral worth and commanding no respect—a person to whom a whole range of othering epithets will automatically and indelibly attach—if she does not take the full responsibility of personally maintaining it in her own case, regardless of any deprivation or temptation she may face.

Freud’s account also undermines itself on other points. Take the two currents, the sexual and the affectionate. The affectionate current in the male depends on the respect he feels for the female.

---

409 For instance: that there is nothing particularly unusual or vile about a woman who is polygamous, that in not gaining the exclusive allegiance of the woman, the male subject has failed (say, by not being able to offer her what she wants—sexually, emotionally, intellectually), or that it is a fact of life that men are often rivals for the favours and allegiance of one and the same woman.
The respect he feels depends on her value. Her value depends—entirely, if we are to go by Freud’s text—on her sexual behaviour. The two currents, the sexual and the non-sexual, seem to have become part of a single—sexual—loop.

Freud pays very little attention to the mechanisms underlying these surprising equations. Are they universal, or are they culture-specific? Admittedly, these are vast questions.410

Even if we suspect some complicity, on the part of Freud, in the thing he investigates, he deserves credit for opening up such highly charged and contradictory phenomena to investigation. I am by no means inclined to resolve Freud’s contradictions by choosing for the truth of any of his conflicting statements. There seems to be something to most of them. One must probably read Freud’s text not as the retrospective didactic exposition of a stable, consistent system, but as an account (often blow-by-blow) of an ongoing process of investigation or reflection, in which phenomena and concepts are unstable—shifting and changing aspect, often radically, as Freud proceeds.411 As in the ongoing process of an individual psychoanalysis, new material is constantly emerging which qualifies or contradicts what was said before. Things said earlier on in the investigation, are undermined by what comes later—and sometimes vice versa. Neither can my own account pretend to be the statement of a finished system in which the Freudian texts under discussion are submitted to a final reckoning. It too is often a blow-by-blow account of an ongoing reflection on these texts, written with a dawning conviction, firstly: that a stable, consistent and definitive account of these issues is probably unattainable, and, secondly: that my account will possibly also turn out to be in cahoots at some level with the dubious phenomena of male sexuality under discussion.

410 I would be highly surprised if these were simply arbitrary cultural constructs. The sociobiological approach (or evolutionary psychology) has going for it the sheer inertial mass of these ‘irrational’ patterns. At the same time, there must be a crucial cultural element at work here, vide the differences on this score between, say, Saudi Arabia, and modern Norway. (Believers in progress could claim that the sexual revolution has made all Freud’s pronouncements regarding respect and debasement, obsolete. Respect today is enhanced by the woman’s unabashed sexual desire, pleasure in sex and sexual refinement—a refinement that will not be satisfied by dutiful repetitions of the missionary position. Today, these features enhancing respect will often even be feigned if they are in fact absent.) Though cultural prototypes may not be needed for the existence of a desire, in the jealous male, to denigrate the woman who refuses to be his exclusive sexual property, the way in which this desire and the resulting denigration are articulated will always be mediated by culture. A satisfactory discussion of these issues would have to broach the whole vast literature on patriarchy and unequal power relations between male and female. The ‘woman who falls’ is the one who offends the male by doing things he would do everything in his power to prevent; on the other hand, the prostitute or low class woman (think of the archetypal Victorian maid-servant) is attractive as an image of a woman men (with money or class) have in their power.

411 In this text he therefore follows the ‘genetic’, rather than the ‘doggmatic’ strategy. (Mahoney 1989: 13)
What prevents full sexual satisfaction: civilisation, or something intrinsic to sexuality itself?

Freud’s usual tack is to stress the antagonism between civilisation and sexuality. Civilisation as such demands a major sacrifice of sexual fulfilment, while our form of civilisation (i.e.: Freud’s) goes much further by imposing excessive and harmful limitations on sexual behaviour.

However, in ‘On the universal tendency to debasement in the sphere of love’ (1912d—SE XI: 187-190) we find a very different approach:

[Psycho-analysis] is quite satisfied if reforms make use of its findings to replace what is injurious by something more advantageous; but it cannot predict whether other institutions may not result in other, and perhaps graver, sacrifices. (187)

Having again noted the dangers both of too little sexual freedom (inability to experience sexual pleasure, except, perhaps, where the object is debased or forbidden) and too much of it (“the psychical value of erotic needs is reduced as soon as their satisfaction becomes easy” (187)), Freud partly locates the problem in the nature of sexuality itself—rather than the cultural demands imposed on it by our civilisation, or civilisation as such. As this is later formulated in Civilisation and its discontents:

Sometimes one seems to perceive that it is not only the pressure of civilization but something in the nature of the [sexual] function itself which denies us full satisfaction and urges us along other paths. (1930a—SE XXI: 105)

In the 1912 work the following explanation is given:

Firstly, … the final object of the sexual instinct is never any longer the original object but only a surrogate for it. [We frequently find] an endless series of substitutive objects none of which, however, brings full satisfaction. (188-189)

Secondly, many of the component instincts of sexuality, for instance coprophilic and sadistic urges, have to be “suppressed or put to other uses”. (189)

Freud does not mention a third obstacle intrinsic to the nature of sexuality itself that he has demonstrated earlier in the same essay: the contradictory demands (chastity and wantonness) posed by male sexuality to the female object. Fulfilling sexual relations thereby become less likely for both sexes.

Freud again fails to mention these contradictory demands when he later, in Civilisation and its discontents, summarises (slightly differently) the reasons why full sexual satisfaction is never obtained: our inherent bisexuality, “the quota of plain inclination to aggression” that is often

\[412\] This argument makes the dubious assumption that full satisfaction was possible with the original object. This fits in with a metaphysics that ascribes full presence to the original, while denying it to its repetitions. The metaphysical desire for full presence is probably linked to a desire for full satisfaction.
added to the sadistic components of sexuality, and the repression of the sense of smell and anal eroticism that occurred when mankind assumed an erect posture. (1930a—SE XXI: 105-106n)

There is perhaps an even more fundamental obstacle to full sexual satisfaction, to which the very ambiguity of the terms used to designate satisfaction may afford a clue. In various languages the very same terms can refer to having enough and to having too much. Examples in English are: the term enough itself (I’ve had enough of your bickering) and sate (satisfy a desire fully; but also: to supply beyond capacity or desire). In German something similar goes for terms like satt and sättigen. Even if there is a moment at which “not enough” has become “enough”, while not yet being “too much”, it will be the epitome of transience, preceded as it is by a much longer “not enough”, and succeeded by a much longer “too much”. The “not enough” and the “too much” need however not be particularly distressing.

Perhaps there are also areas where we can never have enough, where desire is per definition insatiable. If I were to go by my experiences with my own family, the desire to have one’s back scratched or massaged (“caressed”) would be one example. I have difficulty taking Freud seriously when he says: “One of the clearest indications that a child will later become neurotic is to be seen in an insatiable demand for his parents’ affection.” [Zärtlichkeit, also translatable as “caress”] (223; GW 125) “Don’t we all?”, I want to ask.

Lacan and the Lacanians have of course generalised the notion that desire is not the sort of thing that could ever be satisfied by any particular object, to a fundamental tenet of their brand of psychoanalysis. They link this to the notion that there is no signified which could ever fully “satisfy” a signifier, that is: supply it with its full and definitive meaning.

**SEXUALITY AND ALTERITY**

**HOW CONFIDENT IS FREUD REGARDING HIS OWN THEORY OF SEXUALITY?**

Freud often stresses the incompleteness and provisional nature of the *Three Essays*. Is this sufficient to safeguard alterity? Does it sufficiently account for the interpretative or hypothetical nature of even those theses he dogmatically affirms, or otherwise expresses most confidence in? And do his expressions of doubt and uncertainty, satisfaction and lack of satisfaction only reflect a cognitive stance, or is there a deeper sexual/existential meaning attached to them? Are his admissions of not knowing made confidently or anxiously? If solving the riddle makes him the equivalent of Oedipus—a hero of the mind—what would not solving it mean?

---

413 In this subsection, I have italicised the relevant words and phrases in my quotes from Freud.

To celebrate his fiftieth birthday, Freud’s admirers presented him with a medallion showing his portrait … on one side and Oedipus solving the riddle of the Sphinx on the other. The inscription in
Let us not answer these questions too hastily, but investigate Freud’s attitude to alterity by patiently tracing the way he does or does not qualify his own statements.

**Statements expressing certainty, and other ‘dogmatic’ statements**

We start with those statements where Freud not only declines to relativise his own pronouncements, but becomes dogmatic.\(^{415}\) We are repeatedly assured that some of Freud’s findings are *certain or beyond all doubt*:

- The analysis of cases of neurotic abasia and agoraphobia *removes all doubt* as to the sexual nature of pleasure in movement. (203n2)
- A closer psychological investigation will be able to establish this identity [between a child’s affection and esteem for those who look after him and sexual love] *beyond any doubt*. (GW 124; my translation, modifying Strachey’s 223)
- [The determinants of sexual activity] can be discovered *with certainty* by psycho-analytic investigation. (190)
- In cases in which someone who has previously been healthy falls ill after an unhappy experience in love it is also possible to *show with certainty* that the mechanism of his illness consists in a turning-back of his libido on to those whom he preferred in his infancy. (228)\(^{416}\)
- The psycho-analysis of … the transference neuroses … *affords us a sure insight* [*sicheren Einblick*] at this point. (GW 118-119; my translation, modifying Strachey’s 217)

In Ch. 3 we discussed the way Freud represents the work of dream analysis. According to his crudest model, which frequently recurs, the work of analysis turns the manifest content back into the latent content, thereby undoing the process in which the latter had originally been turned into the former. (p. 160) We concluded that this aspect of Freud’s model implicitly involves a dogmatic truth claim for psychoanalytic ascriptions of meaning: it presents psychoanalysis as not being an *interpretative* activity at all. In the *Three Essays* we find a similar claim regarding neurotic symptoms:

---

\(^{415}\) I use the term ‘dogmatic’ in its usual sense, not in the special sense Freud gives to it when he distinguishes between two modes of exposition, the ‘dogmatic’ and the ‘genetic’. (Mahoney 1989: 13)

\(^{416}\) Elsewhere, Freud only claims that the combination of psychoanalysis and direct observation leads to a *sufficient degree of certainty* regarding the sources of infantile sexuality:

> By co-operation the two methods can attain a satisfactory [*genügenden—sufficient*] degree of certainty in their findings. (201; GW 102)
By systematically turning these phenomena back [Rückverwandlung]… into emotionally cathected ideas—ideas that will now have become conscious—it is possible to obtain the most accurate knowledge of the nature and origin of these formerly unconscious psychical structures. (164; GW 63)

What is interpreted would then have no alterity eluding the interpretation whatsoever.

A similar claim is that there are no exceptions to a certain pattern:

The unconscious mental life of all neurotics (without exception) shows inverted impulses, fixation of their libido upon persons of their own sex. (166)

The part played in this by the erogenous zones, however, is clear. What is true of one of them is true of all. (210)\footnote{Compare the following:}

It is only children with a sexual instinct that is excessive or has developed prematurely or has become vociferous owing to too much petting who are inclined to be timid. (224)

Two related types of claim deserve to be mentioned here. The first type involves reductionistic claims of the nothing but sort:

Anxiety in children is originally nothing other than an expression of the fact that they are feeling the loss of the person they love. (224)

The second type involves the claim that only psychoanalysis can give us certain insights:

There is only one means of obtaining exhaustive [gründliche] information that will not be misleading about … ‘psychoneurotics’ — … psycho-analytic investigation. (163; GW 62)

Sometimes Freud refers to enigmas, only to assert the complete success of psychoanalysis in resolving them:

Psycho-analysis … can invariably bring the first of these factors to light and clear up the enigmatic contradiction which hysteria represents [die psychologische Analyse weiss ihn jedesmal aufzudecken und die widerspruchsvolle Rätselhaftigkeit der Hysterie … zu lösen] (165; GW 64)

\footnote{Compare the following:}

When once we have understood the nature of the instinct arising from a single one of the erogenous zones, we shall have very little more to learn [nicht mehr viel Wichtiges zu lernen—not have much of importance to learn any more] of the sexual activity of children. (185; GW 86)

If Freud had been at all convincing regarding the generalisability of his remarks about the relation between instinct and erogenous zones, we could have read this claim as simply applying to his exposition. His exposition would then proceed from just one example, to demonstrate the general features he has derived from a study of this relationship in a wide variety of cases. (See 180-181 and 224n1 for further instances of generalising from one example. This is one of Wittgenstein’s central objections to Freud. (Cf. Bouveresse 1995: Ch III)).
In the following passage the first sentence is a dogmatic statement of clarity, while the second and third constitute an admission of obscurity and unsolved riddles:

The starting-point and the final aim of the process which I have described are clearly visible. [Klar: evident] The intermediate steps are still in many ways obscure [Dunkel] to us. We shall have to leave more than one of them as an unsolved riddle. (208; GW 109)

Freud here thus admits the existence of something enigmatic in sexuality.

Admissions of ignorance or uncertainty

The Three Essays abound in statements in which Freud admits his ignorance or uncertainty:

We were reluctantly obliged to admit that we could not satisfactorily explain the relation between sexual satisfaction and sexual excitation, or that between the activity of the genital zone and the activity of the other sources of sexuality. (233)

A prospect opens before us at this point upon a whole phalanx of biological and perhaps, too, of historical problems of which we have not even come within striking distance. [Kampfesweite] (241; GW 143)

Nothing is known for certain concerning the regularity and periodicity of this oscillating course of development. (176)

We are not in a position to give so much as a hint as to the causes of these temporal disturbances of the process of development. (241)

Repression and sublimation [are] processes of which the inner causes are quite unknown [Völlig unbekannt] to us. (239; GW 141)

The whole nature of sexual excitation is completely unknown to us. (205)

The metaphors of light/clarity and darkness/obscurity form one of the most insistent oppositional pairs structuring our talk about cognition. Freud uses both poles of this opposition; “light” or

418 Similarly, Freud sometimes combines admissions of uncertainty with claims of certainty.

Very little is as yet known with certainty of these pathways [linking sexuality with other bodily functions] though they certainly exist and can probably be traversed in both directions. (206)

419 Two statements of ignorance were deleted in later editions.

The 1905 edition had a remarkably prescient passage, a sort of sex hormone-hypothesis avant la lettre. It included a statement that

it is reasonable to suspect that we are still ignorant of the essential factors of sexuality. (216n)

In the 1920 edition, the whole passage was modified slightly to accommodate the subsequent discovery (or hypothesis) of the sex-hormones, and the statement of ignorance deleted.

Freud similarly admits limits to what he can understand:

From the vantage-point of psycho-analysis we can look across a frontier, which we may not pass, at the activities of narcissistic libido. (218)

A 1924 footnote (218n1) tells us that “this limitation has lost its earlier validity.”
“clarity” to indicate the successes of psycho-analysis, and “darkness” or “obscurity” to indicate places where it is stumped:

It does not seem to me possible at present to state these general conclusions with any greater clarity or certainty. (205)

Psychology is still so much in the dark [tappt … noch so sehr im Dunkeln] in questions of pleasure and unpleasure that the most cautious assumption is the one most to be recommended. (183; GW 84)

[The] erotic life … of women—partly owing to the stunting effects of civilized conditions and partly owing to their conventional secretiveness and insincerity—is still veiled in an impenetrable obscurity [undurchdringliches Dunkel]. (151; GW 50)

This brings to mind that other famous passage, in which he refers to “the sexual life of women” as a “dark continent” (1926c—SE XX: 212). The obscurity ascribed to female sexuality, compared to that of the male, seems to echo the hiddenness of the female genitalia (coupled with the unwillingness of the female to allow [Freud?] access to her inner recesses; vide “secretiveness” [Verschwiegenheit] and “impenetrable”). The figure of “the enigma of woman” is of course by now so stereotypical that it can hardly serve as a placeholder for “the alterity of woman”.420

Admissions that his theory is incomplete and provisional

Psycho-analysis has not yet produced a complete explanation of the origin of inversion. (144n)

The theory of the instincts is the most important but at the same time the least complete portion of psycho-analytic theory. (168n2, dating from 1924)

In spite of the fact that our understanding of infantile sexual life is full of gaps … [der Lückenhaftigkeit unserer Einsichten] (GW 136, my translation of SE 234)

The author is under no illusion as to the lacunae [Lücken] and obscurities of this little work. … It is, moreover, his earnest wish that the book may age rapidly—that what was once new in it may be generally accepted, and that what is imperfect [das Unzulängliche—insufficient, inadequate] in it may be replaced by something better [etwas Richtigeres—more correct]. (130, modified; GW 28)421

Our last quote comes from Freud’s 1909 Preface to the Three Essays. It could conceivably be argued that with it, the alterity of what the book is about is sufficiently accounted for. (It could

420 Cynics could say that “alterity” is but a new word for the word “enigma”, which has become worn out, and tainted by its association with causes generally shunned by the discourse of alterity.

421 Cf. the following:

These psychoneuroses, as far as my experience goes [soweit meine Erfahrungen reichen], are based on sexual instinctual forces. (GW 62, my translation)

Strachey’s translation of this passage makes Freud’s qualified statement in German sound quite dogmatic in English: “all my experience shows”. (163)
then also be added that it would be neurotic if one also supplied disclaimers or qualifications line by line, so as not to commit the sin of dogmatism. This argument has some merit, but does not quite convince me. Most contemporary de facto dogmatisms come with frames presenting them as undogmatic. The difficulty of evolving an undogmatic (individual and institutionalised) practice is hardly addressed by such a frame. Even if an anti-dogmatic preface de jure overrules or undoes dogmatic statements in the body text, it is not at all clear that it does this de facto.

In the previous quote Freud emphasises the provisional or hypothetical nature of the theory put forward in the Three Essays. Similar passages occur elsewhere in the work:

> We must not deceive ourselves as to the hypothetical nature and insufficient clarity of our knowledge concerning the processes of the infantile period of latency or deferment.
> (179)

**The role of assumptions and fictions in the Three Essays**

*It may be assumed* that the impulses of cruelty arise from impulses which are in fact independent of sexuality. (193n1)

The *assumption* of the existence of pregenital organizations of sexual life is based on the analysis of the neuroses. (199)

[The Three Essays contain only] what psycho-analysis makes it *necessary to assume or possible to establish*. (130)

the oral or … cannibalistic pregenital organization … this *constructed* [fiktiven] phase of organization … (198; GW 98)

For the present … no further development of the libido theory is possible, except upon *speculative lines*. (218)

In Freud, such pronouncements acknowledging the role of assumptions, postulates, fictions, scaffolding (217) [Hilfsvorstellungen (GW 118)—auxiliary representations], etc., in his theory are partly offset by the following one, which claims that it is wholly derived from presuppositionless observations:

> My recollections, as well as a constant re-examination of the material, assure me that this [sexual] part of the theory is *based upon equally careful and impartial [erwartungsloser—free of expectations] observation*. (133; GW 31)

---

422 Later in the same passage we read:

Such an application [Verwendung—use] of infantile sexuality represents an *educational ideal* from which individual development usually diverges at some point and often to a considerable degree.

(179; GW 79)

(Note that what elsewhere makes on us the impression of a *de facto* developmental phase, is here presented as an *educational ideal*.)
If the italicised words were true, Freud would have complied with what empiricism demanded of any theory to qualify as scientific. Today, these demands seem unrealistic, and for some time any concern because we cannot comply with them seemed pointless. However, the discourse of alterity has reopened the problem: if our beliefs or representations cannot be derived from the thing itself, knowledge is not likely to be epistemologically, ethically and politically neutral or innocent.

So what? What is at stake (I)

To what extent does Freud acknowledge the alterity of what he thematises as “sexuality”, and to what extent does he deny it? This is a vexed question, because it is not a priori evident what would constitute acknowledgement or denial in this case. Having collected, sorted and extensively pondered all this material on Freud’s presentation of the epistemological status of his own theory, I must admit that I am still unable to reach a stable answer to such questions. The one moment the material seems to indicate a preponderant open-mindedness; the next its dogmatic traits seem to come to the fore; the one moment it seems utterly relevant to ask what this material reveals about Freud’s attitude to alterity; the next such questions seem irrelevant to ask of anybody trying to construct a theory or model; and so on. Only at a very late stage did I realise that what I thought to have detected in Freud was repeating itself at the level of my own text as

423 For empiricism, synthetic truths can only have the status of discoveries, such as, purportedly, the following:

Psycho-analysis … has discovered the psychical mechanism of [the development of inversion].

(144n)

In empiricism (and in folk epistemology, which is perhaps inescapable), to claim of a synthetic statement that it is true, and to claim that this truth was discovered, amount to the same thing. Freud of course does not comply with them—but it is evident that he, too, approached his material armed with, or encumbered by, a whole network of expectations. (The conviction that neurosis had a sexual aetiology for instance was in place long before Freud ever developed his extended conception of sexuality. It remained a constant through successive modifications of his theory of sexuality).

By now it is of course a commonplace that a theory can be biased, even if the theorist’s memory or his “re-examination of the material” reveals no sign of any bias.

424 Why this clumsy formulation? Why the words “what he thematises as”? The notion of “sexuality” is not a God-given denomination for a God-given category of the real, but Freud’s construct (in which he extends and reworks the categories of late XIXth Century sexology). If it possibly misconstrues the real, then we cannot simply assume that what we need is a different account of (or attitude to) sexuality. (Cf. Foucault 1980) Moreover, even if we think that one can never speak of ‘misconstrual’ in a case like this, it should be remembered that alternative construals are always possible.
the reluctance to just admit that one doesn’t really know. (In this thesis I will doubtless frequently be guilty of this myself).

To make this admission of ignorance more productive than if I had not even assembled and pondered this material, I present—as a polylogue, which does not yet settle into a stable conclusion—various considerations, some of which can be seen as objections to Freud or defences of him.

1) “Psychoanalysis does acknowledge alterity.” If we take the admission that a theory contains anomalies as already a (sufficient?) admission of alterity, Freud clearly admits alterity. Champions of Freud could claim that what happens in the formation of theories is that puzzles shift: what to the non-psychoanalyst is an enigma, to the analyst isn’t, and vice versa: the psychoanalyst admits enigmas where the layman sees none. Psychoanalysis therefore does not denude the mind of its enigmas—it only locates them elsewhere.

426 Why do we find it so hard to say: “I don’t know?” Socrates had a hard time teaching his interlocutors to say so. It seems that great wisdom is needed, in a certain context, to be able to say so—and to help others learn to do so as well. “Don’t know” is an absolutely central part of the practice of the Kwan-Um school of Korean Zen, which sees the general aim of Zen as the cultivation of “don’t-know-mind”. (Mitchell 1976) One of its standard forms of meditation is “Who am I?” (on the in-breath)—“Don’t know” (on the out-breath).

Saying “I don’t know” does not mean one is not listening, or cannot listen, to hear as much as possible of that which one previously did not know. Overconfidence in one’s knowledge probably rather makes listening more difficult, because superfluous: if one’s knowledge is fully adequate, one can be confident that what is heard will only confirm what is already known. A certain construal of adulthood, authority, intelligence, competence, power and ethical responsibility makes knowing that which differentiates each of these from childishness, lack of authority, stupidity, incompetence, impotence, and an irresponsible attitude. At a certain level, this is of course often the case. There are many things people in a particular position should know. (In cultivating “don’t-know-mind”—also called “beginner’s mind”—Zen of course does not intend denying this).

However, there are many things we do not know, or cannot know—often because nobody knows or can know them. All sorts of psychological and societal forces work in such a way that we feel a need to assure ourselves and others even in such cases that we do know. In Inhibition, symptom and anxiety (1926d), Freud relates the inability to admit one’s ignorance to anxiety: he professes to leave the construction of Weltanschauungen to philosophers, who … find it impossible to make their journey through life without a Baedeker of that kind to give them information on every subject. … The benighted traveller may sing aloud in the dark to deny his own fears; but, for all that, he will not see an inch further beyond his nose. [Wenn der Wanderer in der Dunkelheit singt, verleugnet er seine Ängstlichkeit, aber sieht darum um nichts heller—When the traveller sings in the dark, he denies his anxiousness, but thereby does not see any more clearly] (1926d—SE XX: 96; GW 14: 123)
2) “Freud does acknowledge the alterity of sexuality, but through the textual distress that occurs when he tries to give a theory of sexuality, not by the success of this theory.” This is in effect Bersani’s position, which we will discuss below.

3) “Freud’s failure apropos of alterity is a necessary failure.” We all fail when we try to acknowledge alterity, and Freud is no exception. The moment one starts constructing models or theories, this failure becomes compounded. The achievement of an innovative theorist does not consist in laying a solid new groundwork, but in undermining old ways of thinking and creating new options. Theory-building demands the formulation of conjectures which go way beyond anything that can be known with certainty. Our judgements are always necessarily premature. Wittgenstein and certain adepts of Zen could say that this is a reason not to devise theories. Those devoted to model building and theory formation would probably insist that one should nevertheless go ahead and do so, even if this is at the cost of denying alterity.

4) “There is little to say or criticise.” In a way all these quotes are thoroughly unremarkable: we know that Freud believes that his theory and interpretations are correct on many points. Don’t we all, and don’t all theorists do so? And don’t we all err in ascribing correctness to things that turn out to be—and perhaps should have been known beforehand to be—incorrect? (Many of the points Freud confidently holds to be certain, beyond a doubt, and so on, have already been criticised by us as implausible).

427 Thought is always situated relative to a particular place, time, paradigm and so on, and even at the best of times only able to reflect on this situatedness in a very incomplete and inadequate way. It is as impossible to know the status of every part of one’s theory as it is to have a perfectly true theory.

5) “Don’t expect Freud (or any other writer) to do your work of epistemological evaluation for you.” We could even claim that whether Freud admits or denies alterity is irrelevant. People are so unreliable regarding the status of their own discourse that we may as well ignore their own remarks on this score, and admit that determining this status is the reader’s responsibility, our responsibility. One could also say that dogmatism is to such an extent the rule, rather than the exception, that getting excited over (or even investigating) the dogmatism of thinker A, B or C is a waste of time and energy. Something similar could be said about how common it has become to supply an otherwise dogmatic text with a relativising frame. Freud’s apparent sophistication in qualifying his own discourse could well be no more than an empty gesture. Scattered expressions

427 At the turn of the century the notion that even scientific observation is deeply theory-laden was not yet current, so we should be lenient on Freud if he at times somewhat naively believes that something is a matter of perception, and does not always acknowledge the extent to which every theory is necessarily underdetermined by observation. Somebody saying “It wasn’t an interpretation—I saw a duck”, or: “—it was a duck” need not be dishonest or particularly naive, even if we know that the object his eye fell on was actually a rabbit or a duck-rabbit.
of uncertainty as little prove that one is open-minded and undogmatic, as scattered dogmatic statements prove the opposite. It could be objected that

6) “This formulation does not do justice to an essential cognitive asymmetry that exists here.” Though we may view any writer’s expressions of certainty with justified scepticism, we can as readers generally trust that issues on which a writer (non-ironically) professes ignorance or uncertainty will indeed not have the status of demonstrated truths.

7) “The business of constructing theories or models and the business of acknowledging alterity are incommensurable.” The discourse of alterity, on the one hand, and the discourse of science (and philosophy of science), on the other, are non-communicating universes, with totally different concerns and values. Should a model builder be expected to be at all sensitive to alterity? Is reductionism not an integral part of model building? Is the very most that can be demanded of a model builder not that he should simply say, to frame his model, that it is only a model? One could argue that with this more than sufficient respects would have been paid to alterity. What is wrong with the notion of alterity, for scientific or cognitive purposes, is that it threatens to turn everything into an undifferentiated mystery. It does not allow for exactly the sort of differentiated qualifying statements which are a necessary tool of cognitive self-reflection and in which Freud’s text abounds.

Suppose Freud, in an attempt at giving alterity its due, had presented everything he says as being equally uncertain, interpretative, speculative, tentative, hypothetical, contrived, fictive, arbitrary, constructed, assumed, obscure, sketchy, metaphorical, figurative, and so on. The reader would find this completely uninformative. Moreover, Freud would in so doing either lie, or deceive himself. If he really believed this, no theory could have been advanced.

To this it could be objected that Freud was never just a model builder—he and his followers inevitably applied his notion in therapeutic practice …

8) “No, there is something to criticise.” When the issue is alterity, it is perhaps insufficient that people generally tend to be massively deluded about the truth of their beliefs. An interest in alterity leads to the question what the price is that we pay for this almost universal delusion. Every theorist should be careful not to present his theories in such a way that they can be misused. If our beliefs or representations cannot be derived from the thing itself, knowledge is not likely to be epistemologically, ethically or politically neutral or innocent. Especially in an (influential) theory like this, about an important part of life, mistakes have far-reaching consequences.

One example: Freud’s theory makes the telos of female sexual development the transferral of clitoral excitement to the vagina. This can make women with a focus on clitoral stimulation (presumably the majority) anxious about their own sexual constitution. Freud is also categorical regarding the sexual aetiology of neuroses. As he has no criterion for distinguishing the sexual from the non-sexual, such a claim is problematic.
Freud is completely fixated on psychoanalysis as resistance to an existing orthodoxy; he sees only the opposition to psychoanalysis, not the danger that it could itself harden into an orthodoxy that needs resisting. He therefore did less than he could have to prevent psychoanalysis as an institution from becoming dogmatic, authoritarian and otherwise harmful. (Fairness demands that we acknowledge that there was little indication in 1905 that the psychoanalytic movement would later become a powerful institution).

9) “Freud’s denial of alterity and his insufficient awareness that he is in the game of interpretation are two sides of the same coin.” Part of the reason that Freud does not more fully acknowledge the alterity of what he theorises is that he is insufficiently aware of the hermeneutic nature of his enterprise and of the fact that his theory concerns things that people are never going to agree on; things for which the evidence will never be conclusive.

10) “Claiming complete success for any theory involves denying alterity.” An example of a claim of success in Freud would be his statement that there is “complete agreement” (167) in the details of perversion and neurosis, which shows that sexuality is centrally involved in each of them. If true, this is a major finding. In any case, it is a bold thesis. It posits a clear structure, rather than using labels that do not advance the construction of theories, such as ‘enigma’, ‘radical alterity’, etc. We have seen that Freud does not in the least claim complete success for psychoanalytic theory, but that he does often overestimate its degree of success.

11) “Freud denies alterity by attempting to formulate a single canonical language that tells sexuality like it is.” Every attempt to formulate a single language for talking about the carnal which is so powerful that it either supersedes all other discourses or subordinates them to itself will in effect deprive people of certain sexual options—practices that are intrinsically bound up with discourses which are incompatible with the psychoanalytic discourse of sexuality. The psychoanalytic theory of sexuality runs the risk of silencing all those who prefer to speak, or can only speak, other sexual languages (fluently).

Such a line of reasoning would however have to present arguments indicating that there is something inherently oppressive or imperialistic about the psychoanalytic discourse of sexuality. That a particular discourse supplants other discourses can have different reasons—it could just happen to appeal to people at a particular time and place. Or it could actually supplant other discourses because it is superior to them. (We could then however ask: superior in what way? As a statement of truths? As an instrument of emancipation and growth? As tool for domination?)

12) “To criticise Freud for not acknowledging alterity is to completely misunderstand the rhetorical structure of persuasive discourse and academic discourse in particular.” The only people who have much chance of getting a hearing for their ideas are those who present them with considerable confidence. (In Freud’s time this was even more strongly the case, because the

428 Kant’s critical philosophy possibly forms a notable, if isolated, exception to this claim.
supposition that only certain knowledge qualifies as scientific, and therefore worthwhile, was much stronger then than it is today). If Freud had further multiplied his own reservations about his theory, he would not have obtained the hearing his theory deserved; its content in itself—combined with the fact that Freud was Jewish—was inclined to make Freud’s typical Viennese public sceptical and hostile.429

13) “Any judgement regarding Freud’s degree of dogmatism or respect for alterity will require a comparative study.” One would first of all have to give arguments why a particular set of other writers chosen for this purpose form an appropriate object of comparison. Possibly this would be a group composed of sexologists, psychologists, psychopathologists, social theorists and philosophers. They would then have to be read in the light of the same difficult question: to what extent do they acknowledge alterity? Only then could we pronounce on Freud’s dogmatism or lack of it. Even if we were to judge that Freud is very dogmatic, we would have to acknowledge that we could still learn much from him. Conversely, if he did turn out to be exceptionally undogmatic, compared to the reference group, we would still have to read him very closely and critically.

It is important and illuminating to show that his theory is even more problematic than he himself acknowledges. This is however not to compare him unfavourably with other thinkers. We have seen that, beyond a certain point, a writer can neither truthfully nor usefully keep on multiplying his expressions of doubt and uncertainty. Whether we want to or not, something always ends up being affirmed, much of it in an empiricist mode, or a mode that to all intents and purposes is equivalent to it. In the end we cannot jump over our own shadows: we will always believe far more than what we can justify, or are even aware of believing.

I am fairly confident that a comparative study would show Freud to be far less dogmatic than the majority of his peers, and exceptionally self-reflexive about everything in his theory which shows that it is not the discovery, plain and simple, of the truth, plain and simple, about reality, plain and simple. The point is not that, compared to other theorists, he is dogmatic, but that one cannot construct any theory that is free of all dogmatism.

429 This could explain why the general tone of “Sexuality in the aetiology of the neuroses” (1898a—SE III: 259-285), Freud’s last work before the Three Essays which was wholly devoted to sexuality, is so dogmatic—more so than any of his other works that I can recall. It could be that this is linked to the genre to which this work belongs, or its purpose, which was to introduce Freud’s views to a broad public of medical doctors.
What is at stake (II): Parallels between Freud and the child engaged in sexual research

In the following pages, we fetch that tired old cart-horse, biographical psychoanalytic criticism, from the meadow where it has been put out to pasture, and hitch it in front of our wagon for a while. We read Freud’s description of the youthful sexual investigator as applying to himself. We trust that the surprising parallels between the two terms being compared will serve to justify this—otherwise thoroughly unoriginal—move.

Freud’s theory can sometimes be read as a continuation of infantile sexual theories or investigations, and sometimes as a reaction-formation against them.

- The genitals. The continuity lies in Freud’s penile interpretation of the clitoris. Strangely, Freud sees biology as offering confirmation that the clitoris is a “true substitute for the penis” [richtigen Penisersatz]. (195; GW 96) In other words, Freud confirms the infantile sexual theory that both sexes have a penis. (Rather than a clitoris, a penis/clitoris that manifests itself rather differently in the two sexes, or two totally different organs: a penis and a clitoris). The reaction-formation occurs when he exaggerates the difference between the male and the (normal, healthy, mature) female by positing that “women change their leading erotogenic zone”, so that “erotogenic susceptibility to stimulation [is] transferred … from the clitoris to the vaginal orifice”. (221) “What is thus overtaken by repression is a piece of masculine sexuality.” (220-221)

- Sexuality and aggression. Children who witness sexual intercourse interpret it as an act of violence. (196) We have seen that Freud’s account of ‘normal sex’ in many ways makes it close to an act of violence, viz. heterosexual genital rape: the absence of words, foreplay or consent is not designated as perverse, and he accepts that the male instinct for mastery plays a major role.

Children’s sexual theories are said to be “reflections of their own sexual constitution” (196), and to be set going “not by theoretical interests but by practical ones”. (194) Does Freud himself quite escape this? If the unconscious is simultaneously infantile and imperious, it would be anomalous if Freud’s own theory contained no trace of it.

Throughout his oeuvre, Freud repeatedly stresses that he engages with sexuality from a scientific interest, and not from other motives, for example, the pursuit of “lascivious thrills” [lüsternen Kitzel] (1898a—SE III: 265: GW 1: 493). Let us therefore look critically at Freud’s remarks on the “instinct for knowledge”, the sexual investigations of children, and the extent to which his own sexual theory is satisfying or not. In the light of these remarks it can be asked what the existential meaning of success and failure in his sexual investigations may have been for him, and
whether it is psychoanalytically really plausible to assume such a sexually disinterested stance in Freud the sexual researcher.

Freud sees the *Wisstrieb*—the “instinct for knowledge or research” (194) as being closely related to sexuality, though it cannot be classed as exclusively belonging to sexuality. Its activity corresponds on the one hand to a sublimated manner of obtaining mastery, while on the other hand it makes use of the energy of scopophilia. [T]he instinct for knowledge in children is attracted unexpectedly early and intensively to sexual problems and is in fact possibly first aroused by them. (194)

We argued above that Freud lacks a *criterion* for the sexual; the various things he calls sexual form a cluster of similar or related phenomena; however, all sorts of things which he does *not* call sexual are also related or similar, and could therefore with as much justification be called “sexual”. This will extend to criteria for calling something a “component instinct” of sexuality. There are close links between sexuality and the *Wisstrieb*: mastery, scopophilia, sexuality as its *Ur*-topic. (Compare also Freud’s remark that intellectual exertion can be sexually exciting (204)). Because of such considerations there is as much reason to call the *Wisstrieb* a component instinct of sexuality as there is for any of the other purported component instincts. (None of them could plausibly be seen as “exclusively belonging to sexuality”, either; each of them could be argued to be neither clearly sexual nor clearly asexual).

Trying to understand sexuality would then be a way to seek a certain form of sexual satisfaction. Does Freud himself attain such a satisfaction? Not if we are to believe the concluding paragraph of the *Three Essays*:

The unsatisfactory conclusion [unbefriedigende Schluss], however, that emerges from these investigations … is that we know far too little of the biological processes constituting the essence of sexuality to be able to construct from our fragmentary information a theory adequate to the understanding alike of normal and of pathological conditions. (243)

---

430 Freud’s case studies often read like the account of a seduction, so that we do not know who is speaking—the scientist or the seducer. An example would be the Dora case. Freud’s identification with Herr K—the man Dora is expected to desire—probably contributed to the fact that he did not see the strength of her feelings for Frau K.

431 The term “satisfaction” [*Befriedigung*] and its variants tend to crop up whenever Freud asks whether his theory has achieved its aim:

Although we find ourselves unable to give a satisfactory explanation [*ausserstande … befriedigend aufklären*] of the genesis of inversion, based on the material present to us … (GW 46; my translation, modifying Strachey 146)

I can report with satisfaction that direct observation has fully confirmed the inferences drawn on the basis of psychoanalysis … [Ich kann mit *Befriedigung* darauf verweisen, dass] (GW 94n; partly my translation; cf. Strachey 193n2)
In itself, it would be strange to deny significance to the fact that a book on sex ends with the statement of an unsatisfactory conclusion. This is compounded by Freud’s teleological view of sexuality, in which almost everything hangs on the satisfaction of the conclusion—so that the absence of a satisfactory conclusion becomes a very serious matter indeed. Freud would thus have remained stuck in foreplay. If he were to settle for this foreplay because it sufficiently caters for his scopophilia and his Wisstrieb, in the absence of the conclusion that forms its telos, this would make him a sexual pervert. If he insists that such a conclusion is what he actually desired, he risks an actual neurosis. In his picture of the sexual investigations of childhood unsatisfactory conclusions are also portrayed as deeply distressing and harmful:

The efforts of the childish investigator are habitually fruitless, and end in a renunciation which not infrequently leaves behind it a permanent injury to the instinct for knowledge. (197)

Freud extends this picture in “Remembering, repeating and working-through”. (1914g) In psychoanalysis it is common that the patient does not remember anything of what he has forgotten and repressed, but acts it out. … He does not remember how he came to a helpless and hopeless deadlock in his infantile sexual researches; but he produces a mass of confused dreams and associations, complains [jammert] that he cannot succeed in anything and asserts that he is fated never to carry through what he undertakes. (1914g—SE XII: 150; GW 10: 129)

I cannot but sense that there is some identification at work between Freud and this child, who is perhaps another generalisation from Freud’s own case. We know that Freud was haunted by the memory of his father’s words (significantly said on the occasion of an excremental accident—or perhaps act of protest—by the young Sigismund): “The boy will come to nothing.” (1900a—SE IV: 216) To the child, such words can seem to seal his fate, and he will thus attempt to disprove them at all costs, probably without ever quite succeeding in his own eyes. I see a confluence of two themes here: “You see, I have come to something” (1900a—SE IV: 216), and “I will carry

No satisfactory [befriedigend] explanation of this perversion has been put forward. (159; GW 58)

We could not satisfactorily explain the relation between sexual satisfaction and sexual excitation, or that between … (233)

To defend Freud’s purely scientific motivation by protesting that his choice of words is arbitrary would not be very psychoanalytic.

432 In an 1895 paper (1895b—SE III: 101) we are told that the actual neuroses stem from the lack of satisfaction to which celibacy and coitus interruptus—unsatisfactory conclusions—lead. It would appear that Freud’s own sexual activity after the first years of marriage was limited. (Gay 1988: 162-163) It is to be expected, then, that the satisfaction of his sexual Wisstrieb was one of the main sources of (“sublimated”) sexual satisfaction left to him.
my sexual investigations to fruition”. As if Freud says “I will stop being that frustrated, ashamed, helpless and hopeless child”.

Moreover, it took a long time of “agitated suspense” for Freud to reach the theory put forward in the *Three Essays*.

In working towards a general theory of sexuality [n]otions more or less inchoate, drawn from his patients, his self-analysis, and his reading, were floating about in his mind, and clamored, as it were, for coherence. … Until he could see connections, he lived in a state of agitated suspense … Only the sense of closure brought relief. (Gay 1988: 142)

If a “satisfactory conclusion” is not reached, therefore, there will be no “relief” from this “agitated suspense”. There is a striking similarity between Gay’s description of Freud and Freud’s description of the analysand who, having failed in his infantile sexual researches, now “produces a mass of confused dreams and associations”. In a letter to Fliess from this period (25 November 1900), Freud asks forgiveness for all his “complaining” [jamern, the same word Freud uses to describe the analysand]; grumbles that he does not even know whether the work will ever be completed; and whether there will be any demand for it; and laments his loneliness in speaking a language that no-one else understands yet (or any more). (Freud 1985c (1986): 471-472—cf. also 473: tiefe Vereinsamung) Freud had similarly remarked upon the loneliness of the child in his sexual investigations:

The sexual researches of these early years of childhood are always carried out in solitude. They constitute a first step towards taking an independent attitude in the world, and imply a high degree of alienation of the child from the people in his environment who formerly enjoyed his complete confidence. (197)

In developing psychoanalysis, Freud experienced himself as lonely, misunderstood and unappreciated. During the gestation of the *Three Essays* Freud became “alienated” even from Fliess, the person “who formerly enjoyed his complete confidence”. Given everything that seems to have been at stake for Freud in understanding sexuality, his many admissions of ignorance—and especially his admission that a satisfactory conclusion is lacking—probably did not come to him easily. I doubt that he was such an exception to his own theory that he was able to fully admit to himself his degree of ignorance—even where such ignorance was unavoidable—without feeling that he had failed.

433 Freud describes the resolution of the Oedipus complex as involving one of the most significant, but also one of the most painful, psychical achievements of the pubertal period: completed detachment from parental authority, a process that alone makes possible the opposition, which is so important for the progress of civilization, between the new generation and the old. (227)

The gullibility that is associated with the overvaluation of the object when in love, threatens to replace parental authority by a new authority—the opinions of the overvalued beloved.
BERSANI: THE FREUDIAN BODY

Sexuality as radical alterity

We next discuss Leo Bersani’s (1986) *The Freudian body*, in which sexuality is systematically, if only implicitly, read as a form of radical alterity. Drawing on and extending the critique of the subject by Foucault and French “anti-humanism” in general, Bersani offers a reading of various of Freud’s writings on sexuality and the drives, especially the *Three Essays*. He reads these works as composed of two conflicting strands: on the one hand, the discovery of the utterly mobile nature of sexuality and its disruptive effect on the structured subject, and on the other, attempts to repress the implications of this discovery. According to Bersani, this repression betrays itself in various moves that try to domesticate and normalise sexual pleasure by minimising its disruptive mobility. Through them sexuality is subjected to the fixed, teleological structures of a developmental process traversing the phases of infantile sexuality and reaching adult genital heterosexuality via the resolution of the Oedipus complex. Such moves “serve as a kind of resistance to, or denial of, the … failure to define sexuality; they provide human sexuality with a coherent historical narrative” which suggests, misleadingly, that sexuality is ultimately intelligible. It accordingly comes as no surprise that Bersani situates Freud’s most valuable contribution to thinking sexuality in the former strand—those moments in which sexuality manifests itself in the form of a radical alterity.

The issue that is at stake here, for Bersani, could easily escape the reader who is insufficiently wary or insufficiently Foucauldean in her concerns. (Bersani dedicates his book to Foucault, who is also implicitly or explicitly present in much of the rest of his book). “What kind of a discipline is psychoanalysis? Is it a discipline?”, Bersani asks. He seems convinced that inasmuch as psychoanalysis is taken to be a successful, stable theory—as when it is ‘domesticated’ into a general psychology (cf. 93)—it becomes another in a long line of forms of disciplinary coercion; in fact the apotheosis of the type of power-knowledge that according to Foucault typifies the sciences of man in the Post-Classical era.

---

434 Unless otherwise indicated, page numbers in brackets in this subsection refer to pages in this book. (Bersani 1986)


436 Cf. 112 and 100-101:

The post-Oedipal superego is the climax of a fantasy which fixes the passionate, and passionately shifting, object-relations of our childhood in the linear narrative of the Oedipus story. *The Oedipus complex represses the unintelligibility of Oedipal relations.*

437 There is a general tendency in French “post-structuralist” thought to think that conceptual determinacy leads to oppression. Lyotard would be one clear example, Bersani another.
Inasmuch as the truth of psychoanalysis lies elsewhere than in the presentation of theoretical truths—for instance, in its demonstration (paradoxically, through its own theoretical failures) that desire resists every theorisation—it cannot be used as an instrument of disciplinary power (102-103)—in fact it becomes a prime instrument for the subversion of such power. (Bersani seems to have something like this in mind when he speaks of the “politically radical currents” (2) in Freud’s thought). We shall not here investigate these larger claims.438

Bersani’s use—generally positive—of the term “sexuality” raises the question of how his position relates to Foucault’s. Given his distrust of disciplinary power-knowledge as well as the other signs of his obvious allegiance to a Foucauldean view of the human sciences, it is rather surprising that Bersani does not, like Arnold Davidson (1987a; 1987b), distrust what goes by the name of sexuality. What Bersani does, is to split the notion of sexuality into two—a “bad” and a “good” sexuality. The “bad” notion of sexuality is that of the “normalised” Freud, as exemplified by ego psychology and Freud’s teleological picture of the stages of “normal” sexual development. The “good” version of sexuality is the one that is not stated by Freud, but only makes itself known through the textual distress—and ultimate failure—of his attempts to tell a coherent narrative (bad) about sexuality. So that what Foucault says of sexuality as a specific historical construct—the product of a very specific system of power-knowledge, which links “sexuality” to other constructs, such as “normality” (vs. for instance “virtue”, or “skill”) and “perversion” (vs. for instance “sin”)—in Bersani apparently only applies to the “bad” notion of sexuality. In contrast to this, “good” sexuality firstly possesses an ahistoric essence (“Sexuality is the atemporal substratum of sex.” (40)), and secondly escapes our every attempt to theorise it. Alterity is then simultaneously that which the “bad” notion of sexuality denies, and that which the “good” notion of sexuality—if understood correctly—safeguards. Except for the passage in which he seems to assent to the Foucauldean analysis of sexuality and its relation to power-knowledge (29f), Bersani usually uses the term “sexuality” not in its Foucauldean, suspicious sense, but in its “good”, kerygmatic sense.

**Why read Bersani’s book as being about alterity?**

Bersani does not use the words “alterity” or “radical alterity”, but I hope that my account of his argument and conclusions will show that they are eminently applicable to his book.

Radical alterity plays at two different, but related, levels:

---

438 They are not without bearing on our topic, though. In Bersani’s approach, issues of ‘alterity’ gain social and political relevance: to the extent that ‘perversion’ is seen as a natural category, and ‘normal sexuality’ another, psychoanalysis can be used in large scale ‘disciplinary’ ‘mental health’ practices (e.g. classification, with its concomitant subjective and objective consequences).
a) Sexuality is radically other to the subject’s identity. The essence of sexual experience is that it disrupts the subject and every form of psychic structure; in this sense it is essentially traumatic. “We desire what nearly shatters us”.\(^{439}\) (39)

If psychoanalysis were to have an innovative role in a Foucauldian genealogy of the human subject in Western societies, it would not be because it explains our nature in terms of our sexuality …, but rather because it defines the sexual itself as that which profoundly disorients any effort whatsoever to constitute a human subject. (101)

b) Sexuality is radically other to the order of knowledge. “Freud’s unique redefinition of psychology consisted of the delineation of a nonhermeneutic ‘field,’ a ‘field’ which he called sexuality.” (101) Attempts to narrativise, conceptualise or theorise sexuality will invariably be unsuccessful; such accounts will

i) always repress the essential mobility and disruptiveness of sexual desire, and

ii) never be stable, consistent or coherent—partly because of the return of this repressed.

Both (a) and (b) show striking parallels to the essential features ascribed to the Other by Levinas (whose work obviously has an utterly different pathos from Bersani’s).

If one could possess, grasp, and know the other, it would not be the other. Possessing, knowing, and grasping are synonyms of power. (Levinas 1987: 90)

a) The experience of the Other qua Other necessarily disrupts the Self—its peace and self-identity. Two quotes will illustrate this; the first from Levinas’s section on “Eros” in Time and the Other:

Love is not a possibility, is not due to our initiative, is without reason; it invades and wounds us [my emphases—AG], and nevertheless the I survives in it.

(Levinas 1987: 88-89)

the second from the section “Phenomenology of eros” in Totality and Infinity:

An amorphous non-I sweeps away the I into an absolute future where it escapes itself and loses its position as a subject. (Levinas 1969: 259)

On a later page (264) Levinas will claim that “Eros is a ravishing beyond every project”, and speak of the “violence” of the erotic “revelation”.

b) All our attempts to grasp the Other theoretically are vain. Theory is essentially a totalising movement that reduces any Other to a part of the totality. “Knowledge … is suppression of alterity and … in the ‘absolute knowledge’ of Hegel celebrates ‘the

\(^{439}\) Compare also expressions like “shattering erotic fantasy” (110) and “devastating pleasures” (6).
identity of the identical and the non-identical”’. (Levinas 1985: 66) The very categories which are supposed to represent (the otherness of) the Other, in fact obliterate it. Theory commits an (epistemological as well as ethical) injustice when it thinks that it can grasp the Other.

c) More generally, the Other can never be rendered present, or adequately represented. (Bersani speaks of “the collapse of representation itself” (113) in Freud’s texts on sexuality). The Other is an absent Other—“the relationship with the Other is the absence of the other” (Levinas 1987: 90)—which only manifests itself in the enigmatic traces, themselves suspended enigmatically between absence and presence, that it leaves behind.

For Bersani Freud’s texts on sexuality reveal psychoanalytic truth not by their success according to the criteria for a good theory, but performatively, by the “textual distress” that accompanies Freud’s every attempt to theorise sexuality—and he believes that “psychoanalytic truth can be analyzed—and verified—only as a textual distress.” (90). He distinguishes between an “enigmatic display of being” and a “communication of knowledge” (26)—a distinction distantly echoing Wittgenstein’s contrast between ‘zeigen’ (showing) and ‘sagen’ (saying)—and (apparently) relates the textual distress in Freud to the former. To paraphrase Bersani: psychoanalysis is essentially about an alterity that cannot show itself in a more direct, more systematic and explicit form than as textual distress. To Bersani the psychoanalytic truth that displays itself in this distress has the virtue of not claiming authority for itself, in the way theory typically does.

To make sense of such textual distress, Bersani typically proceeds to deconstruct the conceptual oppositions on which Freud’s texts are based—pleasure/unpleasure; sexuality/aggression; love/hate; instinct/civilisation, and so on. The two poles of each opposition are shown to be implicated in each other in a way that fatally undermines the work it is supposed to do. Sexuality therefore also represents alterity in the Derridean sense: that which cannot be thought in terms of one or the other pole of our received conceptual oppositions.

But, as indicated previously, for Bersani psychoanalytic success lies in exactly this theoretical failure. “The psychoanalytical authenticity of Freud’s work depends on a process of theoretical collapse.” (3) Freud’s inability to establish an “uninterrupted and comparatively secure philosophical or anthropological system of knowledge” is designated as a “beneficent theoretical collapse” (24)—my emphasis), a failure Bersani wants to “celebrate” rather than deplore. “The sign of the Freudian text’s adherence to the subject of sexuality is the collapse of its own attempts to narrate and thereby to structure the sexual.” (102) The Freudian notion of sexuality subverts every attempt at the construction of a stable theoretical edifice, every “confident and systematic interpretation of desire” (102)—and Freud’s own attempts before any other. At other moments such effects are traced back not to the nature of sexuality, but to the status of psychoanalysis

440 “What can be shown cannot be said.” (Wittgenstein 1985: 4.1212—also compare 3.262 and 6.522)
itself: “Psychoanalysis is an unprecedented attempt to give a theoretical account of precisely those forces which obstruct, undermine, play havoc with theoretical accounts themselves.” (4)

The deconstruction of the fundamental oppositions in Freud’s texts is of a piece with the movement of psychoanalysis itself: “a rigorously psychoanalytic logic … breaks down the boundaries separating concepts”.441 (21)

**Textual evidence in Freud for Bersani’s reading of sexuality as a masochistic shattering**

In the final sentence of the *Three Essays*, Freud tells us that our lack of knowledge regarding “the biological processes constituting the essence of sexuality” prevents us from formulating an adequate theory of sexuality. (1905d—SE VII: 243) According to Bersani this disclaimer is not borne out by the rest of Freud’s text. “In fact, a kind of conclusion *is* reached; it is even rather insistently made”. (37) Bersani, drawing on Laplanche (1976: 87-88, 91, 97), is convinced that Freud does in fact implicitly acknowledge an essence to (infantile)442 sexuality:

Freud appears to be moving toward the position that the pleasurable unpleasurable tension of sexual excitement occurs when the body’s “normal” range of sensation is exceeded, and when the organization of the self is momentarily disturbed by sensations or affective processes somehow “beyond” those compatible with psychic organization. … Sexuality would be that which is intolerable to the structured self. [Accordingly it] could be thought of as a tautology for masochism. (Bersani: 38-39)

According to Bersani, this conclusion is repeatedly adumbrated in Freud’s texts, only to be repressed: the essence, the *central* phenomenon, is constantly treated as if it were *marginal*.443

---

441 I have long tended to ascribe Derrida’s fascination with Freud at least partly to something like what is put forward in the last two sentences. Derrida generalises what Freud says regarding sexuality, the unconscious, etc., so that it is potentially to be found in every text, even the ostensibly most “conscious”, “rational” and asexual. In a sense, he thus remains true to the psychoanalytic view that these things cannot be localised in a particular domain, or to put it the other way round, that we can never define a domain of which we can be sure that it will not contain any traces of sexuality or the unconscious. This would, importantly, be especially true of the whole field of knowledge, or that which pretends to be knowledge. In this regard, Bersani claims that “[i]n the most general sense, Freud’s contribution to our knowledge of the human lies in his problematizing of the act of knowing.” (89)

442 In Bersani’s reading, what essentially distinguishes human sexuality from animal sex is to be found not at the genital, reproductive level, but in *infantile* sexuality. This is the sexuality psychoanalysis is specifically concerned with, which in the adult is more or less equivalent to: repressed sexuality, unconscious sexuality—the same sexual impulses that are at work in the neuroses and perversions.

443 “Could it be that this exceptional or marginal manifestation of sexuality [*viz.*: sadomasochism] constitutes its elusive “essence”—or, more exactly, that it is the condition of sexuality’s emergence?” (37) For most of the book, Bersani will tend to follow the essentialist option, rather than the “more exact” one that sadomasochism is a condition for the emergence of sexuality.
This repression in Freud may have been motivated both by his theoretical ambitions (such a shattering sexuality would be deeply resistant to any attempts to narrate or theorise it) and by a wish to keep sexuality uncontaminated by aggression.

But what textual evidence does Bersani appeal to when he reads this masochistic shattering as the Freudian essence of sexuality?

a) Above (p. 226), we saw that while Freud’s metapsychological assumptions impel him to see sexual tension as pleasurable, he admits that it is “also undoubtedly felt as pleasurable.” (1905d—SE VII: 209) Bersani thus concludes that sexuality of itself seems to involve masochism. “Fifteen years before *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* … the mysterious repetition (and even intensification) of something unpleasurable [which that work will take as a sure sign of mental processes not governed by the pleasure principle—AG] is explicitly seen as inherent in sexuality.” (Bersani: 34-35)

b) Regarding infantile sexuality, Freud writes in the *Three Essays* that:

> It may well be that nothing of considerable importance can occur in the organism without contributing some component to the excitation of the sexual instinct. (205; Bersani: 37-38)

> It … appears that sexual excitation arises as a by-product … of a large number of processes that occur in the organism, as soon as they reach a certain degree of intensity, and most especially of any relatively powerful emotion, even though it is of a distressing nature. (233; Bersani: 38)

If powerful unpleasurable experiences are sexually exciting, they must be (at least partially) pleasurable. As such *sexual* pleasure will *eo ipso* be *masochistic* pleasure. The phenomena of masochism and of sexual excitement clearly put the pleasure/unpleasure dualism on which the whole of Freud’s metapsychology has depended, under strain.

c) If sexuality is essentially *masochistic*, where does *sadism* come in? Our textual examples from Freud have thus far all come from the *Three Essays*. To answer this question, Bersani refers to the

---

444 Reviewing Freud’s examples in this section, Bersani points out how aspecific the sources of sexual excitement have become: “Almost anything will do the sexualizing job … intellectual strain, verbal disputes, wrestling with playmates, and railway travel.” (38)

445 Bersani ascribes an evolutionary rationale to sexuality as masochism:

> [Human sexuality is constituted as a kind of psychic shattering, as a threat to the stability and integrity of the self—a threat which perhaps only the masochistic nature of sexual pleasure allows us to survive. (60)]

An ego-psychologist could paraphrase Bersani’s rationale as follows: individual development is only possible if the organism can survive—and even seek out—a confrontation with stimuli that are incompatible with its current organisation; if the painful process in which earlier forms of organisation are shattered to make way for later ones also offers compensations in the form of pleasure. (39)
1915 essay: “Instincts and their vicissitudes” (1915c) He probably has the following passage in mind, in which Freud surmises that sadism does not originally intend the infliction of pain:

A sadistic child takes no account of whether or not he inflicts pains, nor does he intend to do so. But when once the transformation into masochism has taken place, the pains are very well fitted to provide a passive masochistic aim; for we have every reason to believe that sensations of pain, like other unpleasurable sensations, trench upon sexual excitation and produce a pleasurable condition, for the sake of which the subject will even willingly experience the unpleasure of pain. When once feeling pains has become a masochistic aim, the sadistic aim of causing pains can arise also, retrogressively; for while these pains are being inflicted on other people, they are enjoyed masochistically by the subject through his identification of himself with the suffering object. (1915c—XIV: 128-129)

After citing an analogous passage from Sade, Bersani concludes (42):

Sexual excitement … is the representation of an alienated commotion. We can see how sadism might be a logical consequence of this view of sexuality. If erotic stimulation depends on the perceived or fantasized commotion of others, it becomes reasonable to put others into a state of maximal commotion.

d) In Civilization and its discontents (1930a) Freud says that milder pleasures—for instance those afforded by scientific and artistic work—do not “convulse our physical being” [erschüttern nicht unsere Leiblichkeit] (80; GW 438) in the way that sexuality does. “What did convulse our being, Freud suggests …, was the experience, or rather the smell of sex before we adopted an erect posture. But our sexuality fell when we stood up.” (Bersani: 17) Sexuality—unrepressed sexuality, that is—is again presented as being erschütternd.

e) Bersani notes the frequency and insistency of Freud’s attempts to separate a nonerotic destructiveness from sexuality, and remains unconvinced:

From Beyond the Pleasure Principle to his very last works, Freud will never stop insisting (even as he himself accumulates evidence to the contrary) on the existence of a nonerotic destructiveness. (37)

Freud seems to want to avoid the disturbing implications of a fusion of sexuality and aggression at the ontological level, and is therefore at pains to reinstate—by fiat, if need be (63)—some sort of dualism of instincts in which the shattering forces of hate and aggression will be ontologically distinct from the uniting forces of sexuality and love.

Bersani cites (19) the passage where Freud says that even where the death instinct does not take the form of sadism, i.e.

emerges without any sexual purpose, in the blindest fury of destructiveness, … the satisfaction of the instinct is accompanied by an extraordinarily high degree of narcissistic enjoyment, owing to its presenting the ego with a fulfillment of the latter’s wishes for omnipotence. (1930a—XXI: 121)

But a narcissistic enjoyment is, in Freud’s own terms, an erotic enjoyment.
Bersani (20) draws attention to the—apparently—astonishing statement Freud had already made a few pages earlier in the same work:

Aggressiveness … forms the basis of every relation of affection and love among people
(with the single exception, perhaps, of the mother’s relation to her male child). (1930a—XXI: 113)

According to Bersani (20) this “may be another way of saying that destructiveness is constitutive of sexuality.” Unfortunately for Bersani’s argument, a closer perusal of the passage in question does not bear out this reading. To begin with, the SE’s “basis” is a mistranslation of the German Bodensatz (GW 14: 473), which means “sediment”, “deposit”, or “dregs”. Wherever there is love, Freud says, aggression will precipitate out of it. Moreover, even the English version makes it clear that Freud is here not claiming that affection and love spring out of aggressiveness, but rather the opposite: where there is affection or love, there will be relations of rivalry—issues of erotic prerogative are “bound to become the source of the strongest dislike [Missgunst—resentment, enviousness] and the most violent hostility”. (114; GW 473)

In Beyond the pleasure principle (and later), Freud tries to dissociate destructiveness from sexuality by linking destructiveness to the death instinct, which does not obey the pleasure principle. According to Bersani, all the apparent exceptions to the pleasure principle that Freud enumerates in Beyond the pleasure principle should rather be seen as revisions of the very notion of “pleasure”.446

Instead of moving “beyond the pleasure principle,” we are being given a redefinition or an extension of that principle. … We might even say that for the first time in Freud’s writing the word “pleasure” is beginning to shed its ordinariness and to function as a psychoanalytic concept. … It is as if that scandalously vague word could not stop referring to that which is alien to it—in fact, to the very concept of destructiveness which will presumably ruin its sovereignty. Thus the text is labored from the very start … by an association of pleasure with the ego’s harming, possibly even destroying, itself. (Bersani: 59)

In other words: Freud suspects, but is loath to acknowledge, that aggressiveness is pleasure’s internal other, an other of which it could never rid itself. Freud’s description of infantile sexual life “should make us see the problematic nature of any distinction at all between pleasure and displeasure—at least, between sexual pleasure and sexual displeasure.” (60) The wish to repeat, which is presented as an exception to the pleasure principle, could actually be seen as characteristic of all instinctive (i.e. drive-like) behaviour, which is otherwise said to be governed by the pleasure principle. This “guarantees the harmony between such repetition and pleasure.” (61)

446 Bersani’s reading of Beyond the pleasure principle obviously relies heavily on Derrida’s (1987a: 256-409) reading of the same text.
Freud violently manipulates the notion of repetition in order to propose in the death instinct a nonsexual masochism, *a masochism from which exciting pain has been wholly evacuated*. Thus, in startlingly circuitous fashion, the endeavor to keep the level of mental tension as low as possible—an endeavor in which we are invited early in chapter 1 to see the very operation of the pleasure principle—is now being presented, in its “expanded” instinctual form, as the goal of our search for something “beyond” the pleasure principle.

(62)

f) Bersani shows how close love and hate are to each other in Freud’s “Instincts and their vicissitudes”—both seem to wish to abolish an external world, alterity or exteriority.

At the very beginning, it seems, the external world, objects, and what is hated are identical. (1915c—SE XIV: 136).

Hate, as a relation to objects, is older than love. It derives from the narcissistic ego’s primordial repudiation of the external world with its outpouring of stimuli. (139)

In our terms: the other, alterity, is originally an object of hate. Bersani points out that, by Freud’s own account, the unpleasure felt by the ego at this “outpouring of stimuli” must also spill over into sexuality.

The destruction of the object appears to be inherent in sexual excitement itself, at least in the pregenital stages of infantile sexuality. Love in the oral phase, for example, [with its] fantasies of “incorporating or devouring”—“is consistent with abolishing the object’s separate existence.” And at the stage of sadistic anal organization, “the striving for the object appears in the form of an urge for mastery,” and while “injury or annihilation of the object,” Freud claims, “is a matter of indifference” here, “love in this form and at this preliminary stage is hardly to be distinguished from hate in its attitude toward the object.” (Bersani: 87-88; quotations from Freud 1915c—SE XIV: 138-139)

Bersani concludes (88):

Can the opposition between the ego instincts and the sexual instincts survive this definition of sexuality? What we might call the ontology of hate (or aggression) coincides with an ontology of sexuality. … [E]verything in the forbiddingly complex picture outlined by Freud in “Instincts and Their Vicissitudes” turns out to be simultaneously sexual and aggressive: oral and anal sexuality on the one hand and, on the other, the ego’s hatred of an excessively stimulating world.

But now comes a surprising twist. Bersani tells us that his deconstructive exercise does not actually intend “a rearrangement of definitions”; inasmuch as such rearrangements have been suggested

they have been intended less as referentially exact or verifiable statements than as indications of the way in which Freudian speculation moves toward a disruption of its own categories. (89)
A disruption leading, as we have seen, to what Bersani regards as a “beneficent” theoretical collapse. Freud’s truth, to Bersani, lies elsewhere than in the construction of a general psychology (or any other form of classical, stable theory, for that matter).

Bersani himself therefore cuts the ground from under the feet of his would-be critics by denying post factum that his laborious deconstruction of the sexuality/aggressiveness dualism is meant to establish a positive thesis of its own. 447 Despite certain weaknesses in his individual arguments, I do think that he has successfully established the instability of the sexuality/aggressiveness, love/hate, Eros/Thanatos dualism(s) in Freud’s texts.

**Violence and what to do about it**

Bersani presents us with a picture that is disturbing in much the same way in which psychoanalysis is usually found disturbing. Our most positive impulses towards others and our most negative ones are extremely close to each other, with an ambivalent amalgam being the norm. Far from shrinking from this amalgam, we should welcome it, as it is already considerably better than unalloyed aggression. In this picture, no comforting final victory or hegemony of love over hate is to be expected.

In a sense Bersani’s picture is even more disturbing than Freud’s, however. At a certain level Freud’s later model of destructive drives leading to destructiveness, and erotic drives leading to union and integrity has something reassuring. This allows us to localise destructiveness in an Other, albeit only at a metaphysical level. Of course, Freud immediately recognises contaminations, mutual influences, etc., between these terms, but a view in which these impulses are ontologically distinct is still reassuring in comparison with Bersani’s view, in which lethal and (comparatively) innocuous behaviours become modulations of one and the same basic impulse. The former, at least, holds out some sort of promise of potential purity and potential innocence, however hard such a potential may be to realise. Bersani does not trace phenomenal differences to a source in ontological dualisms. Rather, differences are conceived as différance, Derrida’s notion that foregrounds the sameness of what is different. To repeat is already to modify; the “same” thing (in Bersani’s case: an aggressive/sexual drive) can become something totally different just by being iterated. What Freud represents as irreducible dualisms can therefore be seen as iterative modifications of the same. There must then be points at which it is hard or impossible to distinguish between the terms of what elsewhere may seem to be a clear dualism, for instance, love and hate.

---

447 This agrees with that popularisation of deconstruction into a two-step “method”, where in the first step a conceptual hierarchy is overturned, so that the subordinate term is argued to be the dominant term, while the second step tries to do without hierarchical thinking altogether.
“Othering” is a concept which centres on symbolic violence (replacing, accompanying, or paving the way for physical and material violence and injustice). Barbarity can at any moment emerge from even the most innocuous erotic impulses. Bersani says little regarding the forms or modes of violence. Presumably, however, what he says about the ways to avoid barbarism would also apply to othering. Echoing Derrida, he claims that “[o]ur choice is not one between violence and non-violence” (70), but between more destructive and more innocuous forms of violence. The violence to which the sexual is apparently prone must be countered not by something external and opposed to it, so that the sexual is renounced in favour of the non-sexual, but by a particular type of repetition or development of sexuality itself—formalising, aestheticising, ironising repetitions. These constitute a form of sublimation, a “taming of our sexuality” (115), which is not desexualising, as the desire to replicate is already part of the sexual. (Bersani finds the model of this in art: violence is tamed by its aestheticised representations or replications. Has he found the solution to an ethical problem in the domain of the aesthetic?) Murderous violence comes from immobilising desire, instead of allowing it to replicate itself in a mobile way. “Freud’s work textually recapitulates the processes of repression, symptomatic violence, and ascetic sublimation which, I believe, also unleash sexuality in human history as murderous aggression.” (115)

Discussion and critical evaluation of Bersani’s position

a) Bersani’s remarks on the “shattering” nature of sexuality remain lapidary, as do those he quotes from Freud. As such, he offers us insufficient grounds for assenting to, or dissenting from, this view of sexuality.

b) The nature of (sado)masochism. The terms “masochism”, “sadism” and “sadomasochism” play a central role in Bersani’s reading of Freud. In Krafft-Ebing these terms had centred on the phenomenon of a humiliation which is sexually exciting. In Freud, inflicting and undergoing pain are added to this. In Bersani’s argument, however, we only hear of pain which is sexually exciting; humiliation does not really enter the picture. It seems, therefore, as if he is not really sticking to Freud’s notion of (sado)masochism, as would be needed if his critique of Freud was really an internal one. The two notions are very different in their implications; I find the idea of a sexual relationship in which pain plays an essential role less troubling than that of one in which humiliation does. Humiliating somebody seems decisively at odds with respecting the same person, whereas inflicting physical pain for sexual purposes need perhaps not be. Sexuality is taken to be intrinsically masochistic because it is linked to a “shattering”. However: “shattering” is just one translation of Erschütterung—others sound less conducive to his interpretation.\footnote{Erschüttern can be translated as, inter alia, to shake (severely), unsettle, upset, shatter, and Erschütterung as agitation (SE), tremor, vibration, disruption, blow, emotional shock. (Collins 1991) Bersani builds his case on “shatter[ing]” as translation, thereby undergirding his thesis that any desire for Erschütterung is essentially masochistic. In French ‘post-structuralist’ thought it is fashionable to use anti-
Even if we accept “shattering” as translation, it is not clear that it falls in the same class as pain or humiliation. It is therefore not clear that a pleasure in pain is the same as a pleasure in ‘shattering’. Moreover, if being shattered leads to sexual desire, one cannot conclude from this that sexual desire is the desire to be shattered.

c) Bersani’s attribution of an essence to sexuality. Freud had said that all intense experiences tend to trigger sexual excitement. Bersani elevates this to a statement of the essence of sexuality. If he had no other sources for this claim, his argument would clearly have been fallacious: Freud had not said that all sexual excitement stems from intense experiences, but that all intense experiences tend to spill over into sexual excitement. (Nor is it clear how central the role is that Freud ascribes to sexual excitement in sexuality as a whole). There is in any case at least one passage in the Three Essays where Freud makes a claim that is diametrically opposed to Bersani’s general thesis. Regarding “fright and mechanical agitation” Freud takes the liberty of assuming that:

*Zerrüttung*—destruction, breakdown, shattering
these influences, which, when they are of small intensity, become sources of sexual excitation, lead to a profound disorder in the sexual mechanism or chemistry if they operate with exaggerated force. (202; GW 103)  

In other words: if they become *shatteringly* intense, they cease being sexually exciting.

Bersani in fact also adduces other arguments, but do these warrant his claims? One variety, modality or articulation of sexuality is elevated to the essence of sexuality. Even if he afterwards recants, claiming that he just wanted to demonstrate the extent to which Freud’s definitions could be jumbled, the whole strategy of his text has in effect served (i) to give sexuality an essence, a centre and (ii) to naturalise a norm.

Re (i): We previously (p. 212f) investigated the possibility of a non-essentialist reading of Freud. Bersani’s essentialist reading of Freud, even if done under erasure, tends to reinstate essentialism.

Re (ii)—naturalising a norm: If one wishes the sexual kingdom (and his laudatory invocation of Reich in his final footnote suggests that Bersani thinks one should), it is to be sought in a sexual shattering. Bersani’s theoretical account thus seems to be shaped by—if it is not an apologia

---

organic metaphors as part of the polemic against functionalist views of the subject as “organism”. Fragile non-organic objects tend to ‘shatter’ on impact. A shattered mechanism typically completely stops functioning. Neither human minds nor human bodies typically ‘shatter’ under trauma, as long as death does not set in, their functioning is rather impaired and modified. Moreover, most lethal traumas do not even shatter the mind or body. ‘Shattering’ is therefore not at all felicitous as a metaphor for the phenomena Bersani discusses.

449 We are reminded of those perfumes that are made of bases which in undiluted form have a revolting smell. Cf. note 308.
for—a preference for such an explosive\textsuperscript{450} sexuality, which I associate with a jaded sensibility, needing objectively ever greater quantitative stimuli to be aroused or satisfied. Let me against this state my own ideal—that of a soft, “gradual”, receptive sexuality, such as found for instance in Taoism (Chang 1992), in which the cultivation of awareness leads to an intensification of experience, even when the “objectively” ascertainable sources of stimuli remain unchanged. In marked contrast to such an ideal, Bersani adopts (or flirts with) the Sadean one where “the sexualising job” can only be done by ever increasing excitations that, through quantitative excess, already shade off into pain—or are intrinsically violent, from scratch. This is the ‘hard’ sexuality for which the paradigms are the rigid phallus, bent on rape—that is, aggressively penetrating into what is other (rather than on receiving and perceiving it), and the leather scene—solipsistic\textsuperscript{451} bodies cut off from all but the harshest stimuli by leather casings, instead of the contact of unprotected skin with unprotected skin.\textsuperscript{452} Bersani’s points of reference also evoke the Hollywood sex and violence genre in which sex gets sexier as violence becomes more violent. Of course, if sex(uality) had a timeless essence, all these possibilities would already be present in it. (As would Taoist sex, Romantic love, Levinas’s “effeminated”, non-heroic, non-virile eros (Levinas 1969: 270—cf. also 254-266), etc.). When sex(ality) takes these forms, Freud teaches us not to be surprised.

But from Wittgenstein, Foucault, history (Zeldin 1996), anthropology and (a certain) Freud we can learn to respect the polymorphousness of sex(ality), so that we lose the temptation to define any of its multifarious manifestations as it essence.

d) \textit{Let us therefore not pretend that aggressiveness is alien to sexuality.} Neither in the case of sexuality nor in that of aggression do we have a phenomenon with an \textit{essence} and \textit{clearly defined}

\textsuperscript{450} Bersani tends to use the term “convulsive”, beloved of Breton and the surrealists.

\textsuperscript{451} I use the term “solipsistic” advisedly; Bersani makes the essential sexual experience \textit{irremediably private}; he speaks of

\begin{quote}
that unrepresentable psychic shattering which, even when it is provoked by intersubjective “shocks,”

nonetheless plunges the human subject into the irremediable privacy of a masochistic \textit{jouissance}.
\end{quote}

(114)

\textsuperscript{452} Leather and other forms of armour, including less visible ones, can of course just as plausibly be traced back to finding that one’s inner \textit{Reizschütz} does not reduce stimuli sufficiently. In that case, their painfulness robs them of the specificity they would otherwise have had. (I am thinking of the—to me surprising—gentleness of (at least) some of the \textit{aficionados} of the leather scene). Alternately, we could, à la Bersani, see in the leather scene an aestheticising repetition whereby violent sexuality is to some extent tamed. Bersani’s ideas here abut on a vast debate concerning the effects of representations of violence (e.g. on TV, in the cinema, in pornography) on the occurrence of physical violence. These are vexed issues, to which no cut and dried answers are imminent from either philosophy or empirical research.
**boundaries.** Using Bersani’s mode of argumentation, one could call *any* two phenomena which overlap while having neither essences nor clear boundaries, identical.

However, I do not wish to exaggerate my differences with Bersani. Cruelty does indeed play a central role in that network of heterogeneous but interconnected phenomena Freud investigates as “sexuality”. It is dangerous to repress this factor in any model of sexuality—even if only in a model of “normal” sexuality or “ideal” sexuality. We may do well to heed Bersani’s suggestion that an aestheticising, ironising or playful re-enactment of aggressive impulses is a far more effective way to avoid their potentially barbarous forms than disavowing them in every form. (Stylised aggressiveness is inseparable from the general phenomenon of play—if, ignoring Wittgenstein, we had sought an essence to play, “stylised combat” would have been a prime contender).

e) *What is ineffable in sexuality—and why is it ineffable?* Is it the individual’s sexuality that is unsayable? (In this case it would be in line with the old idea that *individuum ineffibile est*). Or is it sexuality in general—the essence of sexuality—that according to Bersani leads to a “stammering” on the part of the (would-be) knowing subject? If so, where exactly does it become unsayable? Is “can only be said with the use of metaphors, concepts or oppositions that inevitably break down if you push them far enough?” the same as “unsayable”? Bersani’s position brings to mind the *Tractatus*: “Everything that can be said can be said clearly.” (Wittgenstein 1985: 4.116) He seems to be presupposing an either/or—something is either knowable without the use of metaphors or imperfect conceptual distinctions, or it is not knowable at all.

Moreoever, if the essence of sexuality is intelligible, then it loses all its alterity. One can’t very well say: “I can never understand any particular woman, but I understand *woman* (in her essence).” If sexuality is unintelligible, then the essence of sexuality will be unintelligible. Conversely, if the essence of sexuality is intelligible, then why should an empirical theory of sexuality not be possible, i.e. why should the concrete phenomena of sexuality then not also be intelligible?

Obviously, many empirical claims can meaningfully be made in this field. Where would Bersani place such empirical knowledge regarding sexuality? Is it really impossible? What does it necessarily miss? Bersani would presumably reply: “its utter mobility”, but it is not clear why this

---

453 Of course, his own “deconstruction” of Freud, in which definitions are rearranged and repressed essences conjured out of Freud’s texts, ostensibly just as a means of showing the problematic nature of definitions, is already a way of saying something. To describe an essence and then to deny that one is making truth claims for this description, is still something very different from remaining silent (about that which is unsayable). A Heideggerian or Derridean “speaking under erasure” is still a long way removed from an approach to alterity à la Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus*. 
should be true. Is there some a priori boundary to the nature of the insight it can offer as it progresses?

What sort of epistemology and philosophy of science is being presupposed here? Does Bersani’s own discourse not involve countless truth claims, and if so, why should they be permissible, given his strictures regarding the truth claims of theory? Is it the nature of the Other or the nature of theory that prevents a successful theory of sexuality? Is the unconscious in general not as protean and ineffable as sexuality is, according to Bersani? And does not the ubiquity of the unconscious mean that its alterity rubs off on mental life in general, and every object of hermeneutics—be it the “work of art”, “history”, or “culture”? Are Freud’s writings on other topics than sexuality (generally or always) less inclined to theoretical collapse than those on sexuality? If not, then the theoretical collapse in the sexual writings is perhaps not linked to the nature of sexuality as such. (It could be linked to the nature of the unconscious, or of the psyche, or of a certain exploratory—‘genetic’—style of writing also found elsewhere—Nietzsche, for instance. Or it could simply be a sign of failure, tout court).

Bersani does not choose clearly between two positions: that all attempts at a scientific or systematic knowledge regarding sexuality must be defective in their own terms, and that everything produced by such attempts will necessarily be just one more building block in a coercive system of power-knowledge. In attempting to claim both simultaneously, he develops an interesting, but ultimately incoherent argument.

f) Will Freudian processes necessarily lead to Freudian structures? Bersani gives us a radically constructivist (or “culturalist”) account of sexuality and the subject, in which any structure at all is seen to derive from (typically: coercive) social forces. True to the pathos—or even ethics?—of his French antecedents (Foucault, Lacan, Guattari, etc.), he neither expects the sort of iterative processes on which psychoanalysis focuses (such as identification, repetition, introjection, projection) to lead to stable mental structures, nor would he applaud it, were it to happen. To him mobility seems to be the highest good, while fixity is the first—or only?—cardinal sin.454 If Bersani is so strongly in favour of a maximum mobility of sexual desire (the polymorphous perversity of infantile sexuality which is not yet subjected to the primacy of heterosexual genitality), it will come as no surprise that what Freud reads as the teleological tendency of sexuality to settle into certain typical structures, Bersani reads as Freud’s endorsement of a structure that is not intrinsic to sexuality, but coercively imposed by society (inter alia via those speaking in the name of a normalised psychoanalysis) onto what otherwise in itself would have remained the endlessly mobile phenomenon of sexuality. We could argue that in Bersani, “ought” similarly presents itself as “is”—his endorsement of a particular form of sexuality is by and large presented as a value-free analysis.

454 Bersani at one point speaks of “the curse of ‘having a character’”. (100)
Nevertheless, Bersani’s processual, anti-structural valorisation of Freud poses an important question: why should the multiple, open-ended processes (mechanisms) that Freud adduces to account for the genealogy of mental structures, lead to structures as predictable, stable and univocal as those Freud (or better: ego psychology) typically describes or presupposes? Bersani for instance quite plausibly doubts that the multifarious functions ascribed to the ego could converge on anything like the univocal, stable, reality-directed ego of ego-psychology. He poses similar questions regarding the contradictory sadistic, masochistic and loving identifications, introjections and projections whereby the superego is supposed to become differentiated from the ego. (95; cf. my footnote 436) Because the superego is shaped by the repetition of categorically “opposite” phenomena, it cannot have a categorically clear position relative to the rest of the psyche.

Freud’s model is deterministic. Determinism was in the past generally taken to imply predictability. However, since the advent of chaos theory it has become a commonplace that this is not the case.

i) Even if the processes typical of human development occur in a deterministic fashion, these processes could lead to very idiosyncratic structures. (The model of a default structure—“normality”—plus deviations from this structure would then not need to impose itself).

ii) It may be impossible to say in general terms which values for which variables will lead to which results. (E.g. how one should educate children to obtain certain desired results). Tiny contingent factors, tiny quantitative differences, can lead to totally different results. (This is especially marked if we consider the infinitely many factors that enter into any life history, and the difference made when somebody is subjected to exactly “the same” contingencies, but in a different sequence. (1905d—SE VII: 241))

iii) Last, but not least, crucial determining factors will inevitably be ignored by any theory.

We now come to our two main objections to Bersani.

g) Can alterity be located in any specific phenomenon, be it sexuality or something else? Bersani can be placed in a long line of thinkers who have assigned (radical) alterity to a specific entity or ontological domain. God has historically doubtless been the most popular vessel for alterity, as that which cannot be represented (Judaism, Islam) or cannot be described in terms of any positive predicates (negative theology), the Other or wholly Other (Levinas, Karl Barth). In Levinas the

---

455 An example would be the phases of organisation of the libido. Cf. note 356.
456 These issues are linked to the questions we posed in the previous section regarding the aims of psychoanalytic therapy, which again feature in the closing pages of my “Conclusion”.

other person has a status of Other that is closely related to that of God. In Kant the *Ding an sich* and the sublime are radically other. In many readings of psychoanalysis the unconscious is said, not without reason, to have the status of other. As noted before, Bersani does not use terms like alterity, other and otherness, in effect, however, he adds sexuality to this list. As sexuality in Freud’s account is permeated by the unconscious, and vice versa, Bersani’s move is of course not without precedent in Freud himself. However, Bersani seems to be replacing the alterity of the unconscious by the alterity of sexuality; moreover, sexuality to him becomes far less amenable to thematisation than the unconscious in Freud. If even Freud can be criticised for often describing the unconscious as if alterity is limited to it, or absolutely concentrated in it, Bersani in fact localises alterity in an even more specific and limited domain: sexuality. Alterity is attributed to sexuality so emphatically that it hardly seems to feature in the non-sexual. A second main objection to Bersani is that

h) *Alterity is conceived of as something that totally resists any discursive understanding.* The interpretative character of our whole understanding of the specifically human seems to be denied—the non-sexual seems to be the site of a solid, non-interpretative knowledge (we seem to always have far more than traces to go by), while the sexual does not even allow interpretation (we apparently do not even have traces to go by). Polarising thought tends to close us off to alterity, and Bersani introduces an extreme polarisation both between the sexual and the non-sexual, and between what is other and what is ordinary. If alterity were the localisable phenomenon he makes it out to be, it would cease being alterity. (Part of the agenda from which he localises alterity in sex, seems to be the dream—by now fairly shop-soiled—that sex could become the fulcrum for a conceptual and social revolution).
CONCLUSION

This “Conclusion” has a somewhat ambiguous status, because I neither stick to what can be said about a single text of Freud’s, nor attempt to say something that can safely be taken to be valid across the board for Freud’s whole oeuvre. Rather, I summarise and expand upon my findings regarding the texts focused on in the body of this thesis. The later Freud probably gives more scope to love, ethics and rationality than the Freud of these texts; however, without re-reading the rest of the Freudian corpus I do not want to commit myself to any definitive statements regarding these and other differences with the texts under consideration.

THE NOTION OF ‘NECESSARY FAILURE’ AS THE LEITMOTIF OF THIS CONCLUSION

The reader will have noticed that the notion of “necessary failure” often recurs in this thesis. In the literature othering and not respecting alterity are often treated as something so base and despicable that only she who is utterly free of it, can look herself and her fellow human beings in the eye. Discourse analysis tends to restrict itself to analysing the other’s othering—preferably the lethal othering found in this century’s worst forms of racism and sexism. (An example would be Sartre’s (1970) “Portrait of the Anti-Semite”, where tendencies to othering that I consider to be universal are othered as if their scope is restricted to one particularly contemptible type of human being). Freud’s approach is usually very different. He does not treat othering as a phenomenon limited to abnormal, sick or evil individuals or groups. Freud’s self-analysis had helped him see how little of what is human was alien to him; in his analysis of others he came to similar findings. In Freud’s approach patience is of the essence and there is little room for moralising or condemnation that is not at the very least mitigated by understanding—not that Freud himself always and everywhere lived up to this; he could at times pass sweeping judgements on people in a way that sounds shocking today. (Cf. note 338) In this case, lest we condemn Freud for sometimes condemning other people, I would ask that the exception be judged in terms of the rule.

The tendency to treat othering as a phenomenon that can be localised in particular individuals or groups chimes well with the historical ambition of philosophy to provide perfect solutions to life’s problems: if not respecting alterity is identified as a sin and a problem, wishful thinking can lead the philosopher to think that at least he has overcome it.

Everything I believe to have learnt in the reading, writing and thinking I did for this thesis, points in the opposite direction. Innocence towards the other is impossible. We necessarily fail, and will continue to fail, to do justice to her, him, them or it. This does not make every failure morally or philosophically equal—if we necessarily fail to some extent, this does not turn every failure into something necessary, for which we bear no responsibility. Perhaps “respect for the other” should

457 While simultaneously ontologically grounding their negative counterpart in the death instinct.
then not be linked to success in respecting alterity, but to integrity in negotiating this necessary failure: reflecting upon it, acknowledging any small and partial advances that may have been made, and trying to find ways of making amends for the failures recognised.

This necessary failure occurs at a host of different levels. Freud describes the interpreting subject as necessarily falsifying reality, and thus failing to respect the alterity of the other person, the past, and so on. Our attempts to completely rid ourselves of othering will necessarily fail; Bersani and Derrida would say that this is but one example of the fact that we can never abjure violence completely. Levinas says that we are always guilty before the gaze of the other. Derrida describes us as necessarily failing to do justice to alterity, and necessarily failing to escape from the violence to the other contained in Western metaphysics: “‘Metaphysical assumptions’ … aren’t faults, errors, sins or accidents that could be avoided.” (Derrida 1992: 61) We have seen that Freud in his theory and practice repeatedly fails to do justice to alterity and to avoid othering, and often implicitly acknowledges this by admitting the limitations of his theory. The analysand’s transference involves an extreme distortion of the real nature of (his relation to) the analyst. The analyst will necessarily fail to be fully open to the alterity of the analysand. I myself undoubtedly fail to do justice to the alterity of Freud’s text, self him in commending him, and other him in criticising him.

Investigating this topic has made my failure to do justice to the alterity of the other bigger and more conspicuous to myself. Even if one has very modest expectations in this regard, one would hope that occupying oneself with this topic would change one’s life, even if only marginally. To the extent that this has hardly happened in my own case, I feel rather shame-faced about it. As an approach to ethics, an interest in alterity is characterised by the fact that it is linked to attitudes so deeply; it is not typically the sort of thing that can be captured in rules and laws. What difference is the philosophy of alterity likely to make to the world if the attitude of even those occupying themselves with it hardly changes?458

THE SELF’S RELATION TO OTHER PERSONS

We start with “the other” in its most concrete sense: the other person. How are the fundamental relations between self and other presented in the texts studied? We disagree most decidedly (p. 76) with Ricoeur’s (1972: 61) claim that Freud’s model of the psychical apparatus in the “Project” is fundamentally solipsistic. The model of this apparatus in the Traumdeutung is not solipsistic either, partly because the fundamental metaphor of censorship imports the social and political directly into the individual subject. (p. 97) In the Three Essays, Freud has a strong parti

458 Arne Naess once remarked that gatherings of philosophers always intrigued him: there they are, ostensibly subscribing to such different philosophies, but when they clamour for their share at the table d’hôte, there is nothing to choose between them.
pris that infantile sexuality is auto-erotic, and in that sense tends towards solipsism. However, his arguments do not bear this out.

**Solipsism? 1. The “Project”**

Solipsism tends to assume that the structures of subjectivity are in place before the self encounters the other: *first* there are subjects, and *then* the problem of communication between them arises. In the “Project” Freud quite explicitly does not present language as such a means of communication between prior subjects. The absence of language would not only make communication impossible, but (secondary process) thinking itself. Speech and language are explicitly presented as emanating from the other.\(^459\)

Because sympathy and imitation initially do not involve the recognition that self and other are distinct, the primary situation in which the subject finds herself was seen to be *symbiotic*, rather than *solipsistic*. The challenge facing the subject is therefore not to break out of a solipsistic prison, but to separate and differentiate herself from the non-self (p. 78). Finally, the other also presents itself as “thing”: a being that cannot be understood by analogy from oneself. Here alterity resolutely asserts itself in Freud’s “Project”.

When we turn from what Freud explicitly says about the subject’s relation to other persons in the “Project”, to the implications of his network model of the mental apparatus, solipsism is nowhere in evidence, either. There is nothing preventing us from seeing different mental apparatuses as being interconnected in much the same way as the neuronal elements inside a single apparatus, that is: as a network of networks. (In fact, differential facilitation can regularly work in such a way that the connection between multiple egos becomes greater than between a single ego and its repressed).

The gulf that solipsism posits between self and world is likewise completely absent from Freud’s model. Rather, the psychical apparatus is constantly and inescapably engaging with the world, so as to meet the needs emanating from the body, avoid pain, and more generally, not be engulfed by the intensity of the impulses coming from the outside world. (The fact that the subject is even less cushioned against internal impulses than against external ones does not detract from this). The self/other distinction is made problematic because neurones impinge on each other as upon foreign substances. The inner/outer distinction is made problematic because the inside of the psychical apparatus has the same structure as its outer surface: an interface which differentially

\(^{459}\) Other fundamental guises in which the other person appears in the “Project” (p. 76ff) are those of satisfying object, sole helping power, hostile object and frustrating object (who impels the subject to think), object of moral sentiments such as remorse and sympathy, and object of imitation. All of these indicate that Freud does not present a solipsistic model of the subject in the “Project”. (The possibility of morality and rationality seems less problematic in the “Project” than in the *Traumdeutung* or the *Three Essays*).
allows and resists the passage of $Q$. The phenomenon of symbiosis is primary exactly because in a differential network boundaries are neither pre-given nor absolute. Nothing in the “Project” points towards a self which would have a spontaneous sense of itself as unified and separate. (p. 100ff)

**Solipsism? 2. The relation between self and other in the Traumdeutung’s model of the psychical apparatus**

The metaphor of censorship presents a certain social and political relationship as decisive for the very internal structure of the self: that between one person who tries to impose and another who tries to circumvent censorship. If this is the crucial process to be internalised, it must already in itself be a (or perhaps the?) crucial social relationship. In a situation of differential power relations, where neither party has the monopoly on power, both sides—the censor and the one being subjected to censorship—act strategically so as to achieve as much of their goals as possible. We argued that “speaking under the constraints of censorship” becomes the native mode of speech: a speech that simultaneously masks and reveals. As the alterity of the unconscious was intimately linked to the role of censorship, this generalisation of censorship will mean that speech in general will be characterised by alterity.

Whereas students of psychoanalysis and Freud himself generally treat the unconscious as the Other (cf. the metaphor of the watchman), we noted that the metaphor of the censorship, which plays a pivotal role in that pivotal text, the *Traumdeutung*, has opposite connotations. Everything indicates that Freud here identifies with the “political writer”, not with the censoring powers-that-be. The unconscious would thus be the Self, and the censor the Other. Equating the unconscious of a person with that person’s true character or Self, as Freud also sometimes does, suggests a similar reading of the relation of the system *Ucs* to the system *Pcs*. The ambiguous status of the unconscious and the preconscious—it is unclear what is Self, and what Other—is compounded by Freud’s contradictory pronouncements regarding the relative efficacy of each. Is it the unconscious (and as Other or as Self?) or the preconscious (and as Self or as Other?) that in the end determines who we are and what we do?

**Solipsism? 3. The Three Essays**

If libido takes centre stage, it becomes plausible to conceive of sexuality as if the other were inessential to it. Once the libido theory is seen to totter, the core of Freud’s account of sexuality comes to lie elsewhere: the ways in which the concrete phenomena of sexual life, in all their variety, are connected to each other and to the non-sexual. His phenomenology of sexuality shows that it is a predominantly intersubjective phenomenon. The libido theory is part of a wilful attempt on the part of Freud to deny this.
Freudian sexuality is not Levinasian Eros: it is not characterised by an openness to alterity

If the Freudian subject relates to other subjects from scratch, this however is not presented in terms which suggest a predominance of respect or unalloyed love for the other. Freud appears here as a master of suspicion, who sees deep, intrinsic obstacles to love, ethics and a respect for alterity. Sex/love is permeated by repetition, cruelty and debasement; love and hate are so intertwined as at times to be indistinguishable.

Freud’s view of sexuality could hardly have been more opposed to Levinas’s description of eros. To Levinas, eros is a relation with alterity; it awaits the other with complete openness, not in the light of the subject’s needs, ideas, values or past experiences. It does not aim at possession or fusion; it is not a struggle. Sexual passion is a fundamentally ethical compassion for the suffering of the other. Whereas to Levinas eros essentially succeeds in doing justice to alterity, to Freud sexuality essentially fails on this score.

In itself, Freud’s sexualisation of love (even maternal or filial love) need not be utterly disastrous for love as an ethical force (though love would then probably be of little help in relating us to those who are not the objects of our physical love). However, little in Freud’s account in the Three Essays makes sexual love the vessel of spiritual love, or anything resembling it. It is clear that a highly attenuated vision of the nature of love, and its place in human relations, is at work here. Ethically crucial aspects of love seem to be absent: beneficence; compassion; attaching an absolute, non-instrumental value to the other; being willing to risk or sacrifice one’s comfort, or even life and limb, for the other, etc. Love as conceived by Freud in the Three Essays can hardly serve as the vehicle for ethical impulses; it is an essentially amoral force. It is what binds people together, rather than what makes them benevolent to each other—two very different conceptions of love, to say the least! We are reminded of that later passage (in “Instincts and their vicissitudes”) in which he “for the moment define[s] loving as the relation of the ego to its sources of pleasure”. (1915c—SE XIV: 135) It is hard to disentangle the “affectionate current” from the “sensual” one in Freud’s account.

For Freud the first love object becomes that because it satisfies the infant’s needs. The subject’s relation to later love objects is equally egoistically motivated. Here, however, the aim is not simply to find a new object to satisfy one’s needs, but to refind the original (external) love object. The original object thus (retroactively?) seems to acquire an intrinsic, non-instrumental value, while any later object’s alterity—all the respects in which it differs from the original object—is unlikely to be appreciated. Freud later (1914c) identifies a second main type of object-choice, the narcissistic one. Here the object that must be refound is the subject’s own ego. This type of object-choice is of course no more conducive to a positive valuation of alterity than the other main type, the anaclitic one.
If a repetition of primary love objects is sought in later love objects, this may sound like an utter failure in human terms. However, Freud instead emphasises the aspect of success in such a repetition. It is already an achievement when an object is sought which is like the primary love object, without being numerically identical to it, as this allows the subject to overcome its unpromising attachment to incestuous objects.

In Freud’s view sadomasochism is ubiquitous, and aggression and the sexual drive are intimately related. The infant perceives sexual intercourse as an act of violence—and psychoanalysis teaches us that the infantile survives and remains active in the unconscious. In fact, in Freud’s description normal sexuality is itself not that far removed from an act of violence. To be sure, he does acknowledge pity as a force opposing cruelty. However, the dialectic of cruelty and pity—where the latter is often no match for the former—is still a far cry from Levinas’s view of sexual passion as being fundamentally compassionate.

There is sexual pleasure to be had in hurting and denigrating the other. Thematising othering as “prejudice” completely misses out on such sinister phenomena, which can also apply to intimi. Vice versa, there can be masochistic pleasure in being a victim of othering, which means that victimhood will often not be avoided very energetically, or will even be actively sought.

**Respect, overvaluation and debasement**

Among the phenomena of love and sexuality described by Freud, none comes closer to Levinas’s phenomenology of eros than that of overvaluation. However, even here they are light years apart. Freud sometimes admits the necessity of such an overvaluation. Generally, however, and like the Greek philosophers before Plato, he describes being in love as a threat to sound judgement, rather than a humanising influence.

Although men vacillate in what they want (or Freud vacillates about what men want), these vacillations seem to revolve around the pivotal issue of sexual exclusivity. The man is said to respect (or “overvalue”) the woman of sexual integrity—she who allows a single man exclusive sexual possession of her. (Recall that for Levinas eros was not possession). Without such respect the sensual current in his feeling for her will not be complemented by an affectionate current. Overvaluation, respect and affection are utterly bound up with judgements regarding the woman’s sexual fidelity; there is hardly any ethical resonance in this account.

Initially, overvaluation appears to be utterly distinct from, and unrelated to debasement, which sounds like its polar opposite. Men can experience full sexual satisfaction only with women they overvalue. Some neurotics, however, can only experience sexual satisfaction with debased sexual objects. These then become highly valued. Debasement and overvaluation thus do not exclude each other. Freud soon moves the border posts, however. We first hear that civilised men generally cannot find full sexual satisfaction with women they respect; then, that anybody who is honest has to admit that in essence he finds sex something polluting; and finally, that any male
who wants to find sexual happiness must overcome his respect for women. If male desire tends to be for sluts who are sexually freely available, respect and the affectionate current seem to be absent where sexual desire is strongest.

Freud’s remarkable about-faces concerning the relation of desire to overvaluation and debasement suggest that sexual desire in the (heterosexual) male is essentially unstable regarding these two options: what must the woman he desires be—a whore, or a Madonna? This jaundiced view of male sexuality is matched by certain remarks about female sexuality, which suggests that the female has as deep an intrinsic disposition to sluttishness as the male to debasing his sexual object.

Some pages on, Freud concludes that the sexual relation to the other is never fully satisfying. (p. 288) In Section III we reviewed the countless ways in which sexual relations can be severely deficient. If the alternative of full sexual satisfaction had been available, Freud’s sexual Weltanschauung would still have held solace for those who are heroically healthy (with or without the help of psychoanalysis). However, the search for full sexual satisfaction is necessarily doomed to fail. The numinous other as the other promising full sexual satisfaction is a Fata Morgana. We may note that an other giving full sexual satisfaction would cease being other. Like Pygmalion’s Galatea, she or he would be but the projection of our own desires. However, if desire is taken to be desire for the other, it must be the desire for something other than the simple projection of our needs or desires—a desire, therefore, that is again incompatible with full satisfaction. Even if Freud is right that full satisfaction is impossible, this fortunately does not rule out the possibility of intense pleasures. The superlative degree of pleasure need not be conceived of as satisfaction.

Bersani, sexuality and alterity

Leo Bersani implicitly reads Freudian sexuality as a form of radical alterity, as becomes clear when his account of it is compared with Levinas’s notion of the other. Sexuality shatters the subject, and is too protean to be grasped by any conventional theory. Freud’s openness to the nature of sexuality does not show itself in the form of a coherent and stable theory of sexuality, but in the textual distress that occurs when he tries to construct such a theory. To Bersani Freud moreover shows us that the essence of sexuality and the essence of aggression coincide.

We have two main objections to Bersani’s position: alterity is attributed to sexuality so emphatically that it hardly seems to feature in the non-sexual; simultaneously, alterity is conceived of as something that totally resists any discursive understanding: he introduces an extreme polarisation between what is radically other and inaccessible, on the one hand, and what is completely ordinary and accessible, on the other. The interpretative character of our whole understanding of the specifically human seems to be denied—the non-sexual seems to be the site of a solid, non-interpretative knowledge, while the sexual apparently does not even allow interpretation. Polarising thought tends to close us off to alterity, and Bersani introduces an
extreme polarisation both between the sexual and the non-sexual, and between *what is other* and *what is ordinary*. Alterity is not at all the localisable phenomenon he makes it out to be; if it were, it would cease being alterity.

**EPISTEMOLOGY**

Questions of hermeneutics and epistemology were addressed around two foci:

- Freud’s hermeneutics in the *Traumdeutung* and the technical writings, and
- the epistemological status he himself ascribes to his theory of sexuality in the *Three Essays*.

The more a theory claims to be completely successful, the less it can acknowledge alterity, or even its own interpretative nature. To acknowledge alterity is to stress all the ways in which you cannot claim that your text is simply a transparent, true representation of the way reality is. Admissions of alterity seem to sit badly with the academic and scientific projects: to be a respected academic or scientist, whose writings will merit the serious attention of colleagues and lay people, you must typically present your theory or research as successful. If we take the demands of academic discourse into account, it is hard to know what criteria should be applied in judging Freud’s degree of dogmatism, as opposed to his acknowledgement that the truth content of what he says is problematic.

In section II Freud’s system of hermeneutics in the *Traumdeutung* was discussed. With Wittgenstein, we saw Freud as giving us a theory which can hardly, or just barely be seen as a representation, in which the dream itself similarly appears as hardly, or just barely, a form of representation. Freud needs a complex and heterogeneous theory of dreams to be able to account for the complexity and heterogeneity of the dream itself.

One strand in Freud’s account, adhering to his basic terminology and founding metaphors, seems to presuppose a rather simple relation between the genesis of dreams (the dream work) and their interpretation (the work of analysis): the latter undoes the former. The work of analysis leads us back to the selfsame latent thoughts which were the point of departure for the dream work. According to such an account, the dream would completely lose its alterity as a result of the work of analysis, which would then cease being an interpretative activity, as complete success in gaining a knowledge of the dream’s meaning would be possible. Freud himself repeatedly qualifies this strand, without however dropping his basic terminology, which presupposes it.

---

460 We had previously seen that when Freud admits, regarding his model of the psychical apparatus in the “Project”, that ideas are situated in clusters of neurones, rather than in single ones, he realises that this leads to an unrepresentable complexity. Once Freud has represented the psychical apparatus as a distributed system of interconnected neurones, this representation thus bars the way to a further representation which would present mental contents as localised in space and time.
A second strand is to be found in some of Freud’s remarks, which could give the impression that he ascribes radical alterity to the dream, in the sense that the dream in whole or in part completely resists any understanding. However, this impression is not borne out by a careful reading of these remarks in context.

A third strand, already adumbrated in the *Traumdeutung*, but only worked out more fully in the later writings on technique, suggests a rather different picture than the previous two. The product of the work of analysis will never coincide with the raw material of the dream work. The work of analysis is endless; we never reach a point at which we know what the original raw material of the dream work was. In fact, Freud now uses the metaphor of *struggle*, rather than *Arbeit*, to describe the process of assigning meaning to the dream (that is: the latent dream-content). Moreover, he acknowledges that the analyst, who can never be “completely normal” or “completely analysed”, is prone to counter-transferences which can be as distorting as the analysand’s transferences. In Freud’s later descriptions of analysis there is thus no longer the complete asymmetry between the projections and distortions of the system unconscious (or the transference of the analysand) and the receptivity and verisimilitude of the system preconscious (or the analyst’s interpretations) which was assumed in his initial one. According to this picture, if we describe the interpretation of dreams as an attempt to know their meaning, this attempt at knowledge will always necessarily fail: what we end up with, will even at its best never be the same as the raw materials of the dream work. Neither the dream nor the analysand will ever surrender their alterity to the gaze of the analyst.

This conclusion follows quite directly from certain fundamental features of Freud’s model of the dream work. The dream’s meaning is determined by its relation to its other—what it is not. The language of the dream, the language of the unconscious, is not a particular, definable language game, next to the countless other language games constituting language. Freud’s description of the dream-work could hardly have imposed less limitations on the possible meanings of what the other—the dream, and by implication the other person—is saying. He does not describe a language with strict, exclusive rules, that would enable a process of encoding, to be mirrored by a process of interpretative decoding. On the contrary, his description of the dream-work in effect makes it the ultimate bricoleur: it makes use of an enormous variety of figures of speech or language games to express and disguise meaning; in principle any language game whatsoever may be employed. When we turn from language games to ideas, we have to say that the dream belongs to a network of ideas which ultimately expands to the whole psyche as a network. The psyche in its turn is characterised by intentionality—a relation to what it is not. Because the meaning of the dream is its relation to something unbounded, it can never be known exhaustively.

What comes later in an analysis can lead to a complete change of aspect of what has come before. Therefore everything learnt in analysis remains provisional, even if it does tend to be *aufgehoben* in a later picture.
We concluded that Freud’s hermeneutics does not put the meaning of the dream in a straitjacket. It could hardly have been more open to alterity. To see dreams as wish-fulfilments is essentially to see them as a species of intentional action, which is just an extension of what happens with any action that is seen as meaningful. The various hermeneutic rules of thumb which Freud gives us, do not limit the possible meanings of the dream, but open them up. They imply that only a patient process of listening while suspending judgement can allow us to divine the dream’s meaning. Only contextual considerations can in the end determine which of the possibilities he points out are in fact realised in any particular dream. Inasmuch as Freud does have restrictive notions of the nature of the wishes at work in the dream (sexual, egoistic, etc.), this is part of his substantial theory of the nature of drives, not his formalist hermeneutics.

Both the fundamental rule and the analyst’s free-floating attention are directed at not limiting the meaning of the dream beforehand to any particular area of relevance. By admitting even what is disagreeable, unimportant or nonsensical the analysand tells the analyst even what he does not know; what was treated as Other and thus unrelated to the Self turns out to be neither. Tat twam asi—that art thou. “Wo Es war, soll Ich werden:” (1933a—GW 15: 86; cf. SE XXII: 80) What was taken to be “it”, should be acknowledged to be “I”.

**Freud’s remarks in the Three Essays about the epistemological status of his theory of sexuality**

Having been struck by the frequency with which Freud in the *Three Essays* admits limitations to his theory of sexuality, we assembled and tried to evaluate all his epistemologically self-reflexive pronouncements in that work. His remarks run the whole gamut from (relatively few) statements dogmatically claiming truth or certainty for some aspects of his theory, to (fairly many) statements admitting that his theory as a whole or in parts is still unsatisfactory, provisional, sketchy, uncertain, incomplete, and so on. We argued that we have neither a criterion nor a comparative perspective from which to make a judgement on how dogmatic Freud is, compared to other writers. (Determining what writers he can rightfully be compared to, would already pose a major problem). It could also be argued that a writer can never free us from the task of independently evaluating his or her claims: however much a writer may relativise her or his pronouncements, we still have to ask how valid that which was not questioned or relativised is; vice versa, if a writer’s dogmatism precluded our being able to learn anything from her or him, this would dramatically limit the number of those from which we have anything to learn.

We also pointed out the paradoxes or contradictions involved in the very notion of a complete epistemological self-reflection, and concomitantly, complete respect for the alterity of the epistemological object. There is no mechanical recipe for moving from dogmatism to an epistemological respect for the alterity of the object: if you were to know which of your beliefs are unfounded, you would cease believing them. Believing an untruth can often seem to be a sign of dogmatism, but there is no way of guaranteeing that this won’t happen. If one were
epistemologically perfectly self-reflexive, one would only need to state one’s true beliefs, not one’s beliefs plus certain epistemological qualifications of them. One could also not solve the problem by reaffirming the uncertainty of all one’s beliefs simultaneously. A writer who claimed to be equally uncertain about everything she was saying, would either be lying or deceiving herself; as Wittgenstein (1969b) has so eloquently demonstrated in On certainty, a generalised doubt would cease being a doubt. Generalised scepticism is just not a real option. Moreover, reading such a writer’s blanket statement of the uncertainty of everything he or she has advanced, would be uninformative; especially if every writer does this in an effort to take account of alterity. As there is no simple recipe for taking account of alterity, there is also no simple criterion according to which Freud can be judged in this regard. Because we all necessarily fail to account adequately for alterity, Freud’s failure as such cannot be taken as a sign that he is objectionably dogmatic. His self-reflexivity remains impressive.

We pointed out the many parallels between Freud’s own pronouncements in the Three Essays and his description of the child engaged in sexual research, and ventured that his reluctant admission of partial failure reflects feelings similar to those that children are said to experience when their investigations have no “satisfactory conclusion”.

**FREUD AND DUALISM**

Our views have from the very first been dualistic, and today they are even more definitely dualistic than before. (1920g—SE XVIII: 53)

This quote from Beyond the Pleasure Principle, part of a passage in which Jung’s monism is criticised, reminds us that Freud not only undermined dualisms, but often also posited and strengthened them. In his texts we find a dialectic in which dualisms are alternately blurred and sharpened.

**Freud as a holist and underminer of conceptual dichotomies**

Freud’s undermining of conceptual dichotomies is continuous with many other tendencies in his work: the fact that his central concepts are often not defined (to define something is to bound it against its other: what it is not), and his general emphasis on developmental and other continuities. Differences of essence tend to be replaced by quantitative differences.461

Objectivity essentially demands the ability to ascribe positive and negative epithets to a situation without bias. (This is a precondition to objectivity in ascribing credit and blame). Anything approaching objective thought is hard to realise. “It is very difficult for the ego to put itself into

---

461 This does not mean that qualitative difference is necessarily denied, only that it need not refer to a difference between essences which are discrete from each other. Two phenomena that are qualitatively very different can be modifications of the same thing[s] or principle[s].
the situation of ‘mere investigation’.” (1950—SE I: 374) As long as the primary process holds sway, distressing memories are automatically avoided, so that the psychical apparatus is “incapable of bringing anything disagreeable into the context of its thoughts”. (1900a—SE V: 600) The process of thought found in othering is slightly, but only just slightly, more sophisticated than this: what is disagreeable can be thought, but only if it is linked a priori to the Other, and not the Self. In a way, othering can then be seen as a primary process alternative or predecessor to secondary process thinking.462 The primitive organism tries to ingest what is good for it, and expel what is bad. In othering the same is done at the level of self-definition. Everything unpleasurable is expelled and cast off as Other, so that the Self that remains is a pleasure-ego [Lust-Ich]. Such othering thrives on dichotomous thinking. In “Negation” Freud gives what amounts to a pithy characterisation of othering:

The function of judgement … affirms or disaffirms the possession by a thing of a particular attribute … The attribute to be decided about may originally have been good or bad, useful or harmful. Expressed in the language of the oldest—the oral—instinctual impulses, the judgement is: ‘I should like to eat this’, or ‘I should like to spit it out’; and, put more generally: ‘I should like to take this into myself and to keep that out.’ That is to say: ‘It shall be inside me’ or ‘it shall be outside me’. [T]he original pleasure-ego wants to introject into itself everything that is good and to eject from itself everything that is bad. What is bad, what is alien to the ego and what is external are, to begin with, identical. (1925h—SE XIX: 236-237)

In “Instincts and their vicissitudes” this ejection was linked explicitly to the mechanism of projection, which is so characteristic of othering. We are also reminded of Freud’s remark that excrement, the paradigm for that which we wish to eject and remove ourselves from, is simultaneously the paradigm for that which is found disgusting. (1905d—SE VII: 152) In othering the Other is typically conceived of as polluted and polluting, something the Self should maintain a maximum distance from.464

462 Or, perhaps: as closer to the primary process, on a continuum between primary process and secondary process thinking; in Freud’s description, this mode of thought does not yet know negation.

463 The position Freud presents here had in essence already been worked out in “Instincts and their vicissitudes” (1915c—SE XIV: 136) and was later recapitulated in Civilization and its discontents (1930a—SE XXI: Ch. 1).

464 Above, we noted that for psychoanalysis what the subject has to overcome is symbiosis, not solipsism. Othering can be seen as linked to this very need: the need to separate oneself from others one is not initially, spontaneously, naturally and factually separate from. The process of separation involves both othering (disidentification) and selfing (identification)—taking a position regarding what one is part of, continuous with, or similar to: “I am male, Afrikaner,” etc. Identification and disidentification are partly free acts—constitutive acts—and partly sites of possible illusion. Identification and disidentification take place in a differential field, which can be articulated or rearticulated in very different ways, some of them legitimately unconstrained, others counterfactual in the liberties they take. We always have considerable

footnote ctd. on next page—
An Ich can only fully become a Lust-Ich if concepts and the world have a stable dichotomous structure, so that, it is clear, firstly, what is to be ingested, and what spat out; and secondly, that what is ingested is only good, and permanently good, while what is spat out contains nothing that should rather have been ingested. Othering thus requires dichotomous thinking. Freud undermines othering by undermining dichotomous thinking. (This is related to a central feature of undergoing analysis: that one comes to accept as part of oneself what one had previously tried to eject from one’s Self).

Dichotomous thinking tends to polarise differences into oppositions. Oppositional thinking reduces differences by replacing myriad differences of hue and colour with a single black/white opposition, and by reducing myriad different relations between terms to the single relation of opposition. While it seems to exaggerate the difference involved in any particular comparison, it also reduces it, in a way: both poles fall squarely in the same dimension, even if they occupy opposite ends of it. The two poles are fully commensurable, despite the supposedly unbridgeable difference between them. This black/white thinking is unable to account for the analog differences between phenomena and the multiplicity of actual relations in which they stand to each other. For instance, if an Afrikaner male simultaneously sees himself as the opposite of the female, the Black, the White English speaker, the Communist, the heathen, this firstly leads to the elision of the differences between all these very different Others, and secondly leaves no room for a simple investigation and description of his de facto features, wishes and so on. (Nor for those of such Others). The values of all relevant variables are already fixed at the maximum (or minimum) possible. This oppositional thinking is similarly an obstacle to any investigation of the real relations between Self and these Others: their factual connections, interactions and interdependence. Moreover, oppositional thinking by definition cannot admit that there is anything essential about the items being compared that is unknown or unknowable.

The notion of a distributed system takes us very far from the features found in dichotomous thinking. In a distributed system the vaunted inner essence of each element is dissolved into a complex set of relations with a whole array of other elements. Many crucial relations can vary analogically. The difference is like that between a colour monitor where even a fairly small number of possible values for each of the three colours already produces millions of possible colours and a primitive monochrome monitor on which each pixel has only two possible values.

discretionary powers when it comes to deciding whether we are to emphasise the continuities and similarities between two phenomena, or the discontinuities and the differences.

465 In a way, othering—oppositional thinking—is thus a (primary process) predecessor of, ersatz for, and obstacle to (secondary process) thinking. Thinking is the reworking and qualifying of the results of previous thought, especially wishful thinking (which tends to othering). Dichotomous thinking and easy generalisations (such as found in stereotyping) in theoretical thought can thus be seen as residues of wishful thinking.
If we have reason to regard a phenomenon (say, language, society, or the mind) as a distributed system, dichotomous thinking will be unable to account for it in a satisfactory way. Freud’s undermining of dichotomies can thus be seen as a response to the complexities of the distributed system or systems he is trying to understand. Freud’s models of both the psychical apparatus in the “Project”, and the dream in the Traumdeutung as distributed systems thus are exemplars of non-dichotomising approaches to the mind, and to interpretation generally. A network model softens conceptual dualisms and the boundaries between elements. Instead of the digital notion of a boundary, Freud gives us the analog notion of variable facilitation (“Project”), or its non-neurological counterparts (the hermeneutics of the Traumdeutung). In these works, Freud gives us a form of holism: we deal with fields of differences rather than separate entities or oppositional dyads containing their quiddity within themselves, as something substantial. Importantly, however, whereas holism generally tends to emphasise sameness, unity and order, Freud’s holism emphasises difference, conflict and disorder.

Let us recapitulate some of the dichotomies that Freud undermines, directly or indirectly, thereby creating a space in which alterity can appear:

- **Normal/abnormal.** Freud decisively undermines this dichotomy, mostly in the course of his discussion of the perversions. He deprives it of its apparent self-evidence, both by emphasising the continuity between what is normal and what is abnormal (for instance, psychoanalysis is “decidedly opposed to any attempt at separating off homosexuals from the rest of mankind as a group of a special character.” (1905d—SE VII: 145n)), and by showing that the boundary involved is not natural, but conventional.

- **Male/female.** Freud admits that is extremely unclear what the terms “male” and “female” mean—but however we gloss them, we have to admit that people are psychologically bisexual.

- **Success/failure.** A parapraxis [Fehlleistung] is simultaneously a success [Leistung] and a failure [Fehler].

- **Showing/hiding.** These terms have a complex relation to each other; mental contents cannot be said to unambiguously show or hide their meaning. (p. 123) Signs are neither transparent nor opaque. This is linked to a blurring of Freud’s initial sharp distinction between the latent and the manifest.

- **Remembering/non-remembering; memory/phantasy.** Once phenomena are admitted that are intermediate between these two poles, a pure example of either pole, which would not be contaminated by its putative opposite, becomes unfindable. (p. 172)

- **Correct and incorrect analyses.** Freud implicitly admits that there is no sharp line separating the one from the other. (p. 172)
• The utterly repetitive nature of the analysand’s interpretation of the analyst, as opposed to the utter openness of the analyst to the uniqueness and specificity of the analysand. With the admission that the analyst can never be fully normal, fully analysed, and without counter-transferences of his own, this initially sharp opposition is softened considerably. (p. 175f)

Concomitantly, the analyst’s interpretations must lie somewhere between pure receptivity and pure projection.

• Elements and relations. In the “Project” the relations between ideas are given by the relations between neurones. However, as ideas are not represented by single neurones, but by complexes of neurones, the ideas themselves become relational.

• Preconscious/unconscious. (p. 120ff) Freud softens this dualism in various ways, for instance by admitting multiple censorships between the unconscious and consciousness, by reminding the reader that this distinction is not as schematic and clear-cut as some of his formulations may suggest, and so on. Most importantly, we can say that the whole notion of censorship softens it. The disguised mode of expression, which Freud depicts as the result of a compromise between the striving of unconscious contents to reach consciousness and the demands of the censorship, in fact becomes the default mode of signification. Consciousness and the unconscious can then be seen as ideal-typical extremes for the way in which mental contents can lean one way or the other, rather than positive realities between which a compromise has been reached. It is not possible for a sign to be completely verstellt or completely unverstellt. If the loss of an element’s relations with its surroundings is what makes an element unconscious, there is clearly a continuum between what is most unconscious and what is most conscious. We concluded that we can perhaps learn something more interesting from Freud than that there is an unconscious and a preconscious, viz. that the unconscious—the primary process—can make itself felt at any moment, partly because the unconscious and the preconscious can never be clearly distinguished and separated in the first place. They cannot be conceived of as a Self and an Other that are simply exterior to each other. The primary and secondary process do not each have their own separate domain. In this way the alterity of the unconscious, as something that cannot be localised in an Other that is fairly distinct from a Self, come to permeate mental and social life.

By undermining these dichotomies, the other, which is irreducible to either pole of a dichotomy, gets an opportunity to appear. This other can now also present itself as something positive, inter alia because it affords an opportunity for transcending primitive thought, pre-thought, and the unthought.

466 We could probably with as much justification have focused on everything Freud does to establish such a dualism, and criticised him for it. Is the bottle of Coke half-full or half-empty?
As everybody knows, Derrida claims that conceptual oppositions tend to be conceptual hierarchies: one term occupies the superior position, and the other the inferior one.

In a classical philosophical opposition we are not dealing with the peaceful coexistence of a vis-à-vis, but rather with a violent hierarchy. One of the two terms governs the other (axiologically, logically, etc.), or has the upper hand. To deconstruct the opposition, first of all, is to overturn the hierarchy at a given moment. (Derrida 1981: 41)

Freud indeed also upsets dichotomous thinking by implicitly or explicitly reversing hierarchies: abnormality precedes normality, and the normal is to be understood in terms of the abnormal, instead of vice versa, as our Platonic heritage inclines us to think. It is not clear whether we should read Freud as taking the essence of sexuality to lie in its origin (infantile sexuality) or its goal (normality). As full normality is taken to be but an ideal type from which all real individuals depart to a greater or lesser extent, the “abnormality” that seems to be the exception, turns out to be the rule.

Other ways in which Freud problematises concepts and dichotomies

In a number of places, Freud shows us that apparent conceptual opposites at a certain point merge into each other. Phenomena that seem furthest apart, suddenly appear in the same place. Masochism clearly demonstrates that pleasure and pain, pleasure and unpleasure are not mutually exclusive: “every pain contains in itself the possibility of pleasure” (1905d—SE VII: 159). Phantasy is alternatively presented as the essence of secondary revision and as the essence of dreaming. (p. 140) Hate and love can easily be transformed into each other, and in the infant can at times be indistinguishable from each other. (p. 268) This is in line with that passage in a later text, “Repression” (1915d—SE XIV: 150), where we read:

The objects to which men give most preference, their ideals, proceed from the same perceptions and experiences as the objects they most abhor, and … they were originally only distinguished from one another through slight modifications.

(The reality principle is similarly but a modification of the pleasure principle).

In the texts read, a strange figure was repeatedly encountered, in which the paradigmatic example of a phenomenon is presented as in fact being an exception. The beautiful is that which is sexually arousing, but what is most sexually arousing, the genitals, never really qualifies as beautiful. The paradigmatic sexual pleasure occurs in the (male) orgasm, which does not at all follow the pattern of other sexual pleasures. (p. 229)

Disgust is a barrier to the libido, but also a stimulus to it: “The sexual instinct in its strength enjoys overriding this disgust.” (152) We have seen that the male’s overvaluation and undervaluation of the female as sexual object is intimately tied to her “sexual integrity”, but then in a completely unstable way; and also that the difference between the mother and the whore at one moment appears to be “one of sharpest contrast”, and at the next “[n]ot after all so great.” It is
no sin against logic to see a difference as vast at one moment, and infinitesimal at the next; difference and sameness are not dictated by the facts. Freud here can be read as giving us an analysis of the strangeness of both concepts—how differently they behave from the way logicians and philosophers generally expect them to—and (male?) psychology. Wherever we do not have a clear boundary, but rather a contamination, interlacing, invagination and confusion of two terms, purity is nowhere to be seen. This poses a fundamental challenge to a Self that for cultural or other reasons has wanted to assert its purity vis à vis the negative and the other.

**FREUD AND OTHERING**

Psychoanalysis could never have developed had Freud not been able to distance himself to a considerable extent from the massive cultural and psychological obstacles to looking at mental disturbances, sexuality and dreams in a non-judgmental way. Polarising thought in itself is othering, even where it does not follow the lines of conventional social prejudices; Freud’s innovations in developing a non-polarising style of thought thus contribute to reducing othering in a general way. If we all necessarily fail to do justice to alterity, and are all necessarily guilty of othering, the crucial question to ask of any contribution to the cultural resources of humankind is whether it helps to reduce othering, or more exactly, where it reduces othering and where it doesn’t. Though we read Freud’s thought as being essentially opposed to othering, we argue that he himself at times also falls into othering.

**Freud as a dualist and sharpener of conceptual oppositions**

The dichotomies in Freud that we discuss here are not obviously related to othering. We discuss them here because of the systematic interconnection between dichotomous thinking and othering.

Freud often treats conceptual oppositions—and conceptual distinctions—as far sharper than warranted by his own arguments or his own relativisation of distinctions he elsewhere treats as unproblematic. Having problematised the notion of pleasure, he will elsewhere start listing exceptions to the pleasure principle in a rather cavalier way. Without having defined the sexual, he will attempt, unconvincingly, to delineate it against the purportedly non-sexual. On the one hand he talks of the latent dream-thoughts as if they are bounded; on the other his arguments show that we can never say when the process of spinning out latent dream-thoughts to a manifest dream ends.

Freud tries to establish a dualism between the “sensual” and the “affectionate” currents in sexuality, but in the end blurs the distinction between the two to such an extent that it threatens to become obliterated (which is perhaps why he later throws them together under the rubric of “Eros”).

Bersani (1986: 88) argues that Freud himself implicitly also undermines the sexuality/aggression dualism which he is otherwise at pains to safeguard: “Everything in the forbiddingly complex
picture outlined by Freud in “Instincts and their vicissitudes” turns out to be simultaneously sexual and aggressive.” What Freud would see as an irreducible dualism, Bersani takes to be iterative modifications of the same. Attempts to secure unalloyed love, or a sexuality from which every trace of aggression is absent, are bound to fail. Because our different impulses are so narrowly related, purity of motive and action is impossible.

**FREUD’S SHARPENING OF BOUNDARIES AND EXAGGERATION OF DIFFERENCES BETWEEN MALE AND FEMALE, INFANTILE AND ADULT SEXUALITY**

Female sexuality is haunted by a number of different dangers: clitoral sexuality is a simulacrum of male sexuality; female maturity and normality are only achieved when the centre of female sexual experience moves to the vagina. Even then, like all libido, female libido remains essentially masculine. Moreover, the female must struggle against a cloacal confusion of the anus and the vagina. All these features tend to exaggerate the difference between what is sexually normal for the male and for the female, with male sexuality presented as relatively unproblematic, and female sexuality as intrinsically problematic.

Freud also exaggerates the difference between infantile sexuality and normal adult sexuality by wilfully downplaying the role of the object and the genitals in infantile sexuality, and by linking adult abnormalities to normative infantile developmental stages.

In both cases, Freud clearly seems to have exaggerated the distance and distinctions, and downplayed the continuities and overlaps. The de facto overlap and continuity between female sexuality and male sexuality, and between adult sexuality and infantile sexuality, then becomes labelled as a pathological defect in the female or adult. This could be argued to be conducive to the woman’s treating anything ‘male’ in her as an Other to be suppressed, repressed, denied, disowned or overcome, and the adult treating the child in himself or herself similarly.

When Freud labels certain things as perversions without linking this to subjective experience—the suffering and unfulfilment on the part of the ‘pervert’ or his object—this can also be seen as a form of othering. Why pass such judgements except if people suffer or are harmed? The point is not that in matters sexual “everything goes”, but that a sexual ethics and aesthetics require a discourse not centred, like Freud’s, on notions of perversion, pathology and normality. Freud’s implicit suggestion that “perversion” is a problem when it reduces the subject’s autonomy may form a useful contribution to such an alternative discourse.

---

467 That Freud here exaggerates differences does not exclude that other differences, even major ones, may exist that he does not (sufficiently) acknowledge. I do not mean to say that men and women, adults and children, are less different than Freud says (this is an issue on which I suspend judgement), but only that he exaggerates those differences that he explicitly identifies and discusses.
While Freud’s emphasis on the continuity between normality and pathology could be said to de-other those previously othered as pathological, the terms in which he does this could be criticised as in their turn pathologising “everyday life”. What is needed to escape othering of both categories is again perhaps a strategy which is less bound up with the whole notion of pathology and the medical-normative discourse from which it derives.

**FLATTENING OUT DIFFERENCES: FREUD AND UNWARRANTED GENERALISATIONS**

Generalisations, oppositional thinking, teleology and the advocacy of an ultimate explanatory language flatten out differences, and deny alterity, by telling us that we can know in advance what we shall encounter, as well as how we should conceptualise and evaluate it. Oppositional thinking reduces differences by replacing myriad differences of hue and colour into a single black/white opposition, and by reducing myriad different relations between terms to the single relation of opposition. Teleology flattens out differences by supplying an a priori category determining how a phenomenon should be described, classified and judged: its ‘function’. Generalisation flattens out differences by subsuming a variety of phenomena or language games under the authority of a single canonical paradigm, concept or language game.

The objectionable generalisations we identified mostly occurred in Freud’s theory of sexuality. The notion of libido suggests a uniform sexual currency for which all sexual phenomena can be exchanged, and a clear separation of the sexual from its Other, the non-sexual. (The two aspects of drawing a boundary and homogenising everything inside the boundary are interrelated; the mechanism for clearly identifying the entity your theory is about is similar to the one in which othering in social life falsifies one’s continuities, similarities, interaction and interdependence with one’s environment so as to constitute a Self that is in essence independent of its Other).

Freud’s description of the role of the erotogenic zones in infantile sexuality involves an unwarranted generalisation from an already questionable interpretation of certain atypical phenomena, such as thumb-sucking, which he first interprets in a highly tendentious way, and then takes to be paradigmatic.

His conceptualisation of sexual pleasure tries to give general validity to the idea that in pleasure sexual tension is reduced or stays constant; the problems he himself identifies in this view do not lead him to abandon his basic model, which returns in much later works without modification.

Making the erotogenic zones central means that the sexual object becomes relatively unimportant; assimilating sexual pleasure to sexual satisfaction—the reduction of tension to a point where sexual desire is temporarily extinguished—means that sexual desire cannot aim at the adventure of an encounter with an essentially unpredictable Other. The desire for an absence of tension or absence of activity is not the desire for the other. (p. 328)
THE IN-BETWEEN AS FREUD’S TYPICAL POSITION

I started writing this thesis with a cluster of different meanings of “other”, “alterity”, etc. in my mind. In the course of writing it, I played with a large variety of these meanings.

The owl of Minerva flies at dusk. In the twilight after my day’s work, a clearer pattern emerges than any I saw while still engaged in writing the bulk of this thesis.

Freud’s characteristic position, from which the strength and even genius of his writing derives, is the in-between. He refuses to make any simple choices between alternatives that are otherwise often presented in “either/or” terms: *either a or b*. Instead, he conceives of all sorts of phenomena in “both/and” terms—*a and b*—or in “neither/nor” terms—*neither a nor b*. Terms previously conceived of as forming an exclusive disjunction, now no longer do so.

Freud uses existing dualisms or reshapes them, while in his work of observation, thought and writing typically refusing to allow any dualism to solidify, so that its two terms are clearly delineated from each other, are stable, and have a determinate relation to each other. The index of the fact that he has observed and thought is exactly that these dualisms become problematic—they are used, but only “under erasure”, so to speak.

If a thorough process of investigation were to leave a dualism intact, this would mean that the dualism was perfect, and the concepts used unproblematically applicable to reality. The conceptual dualism would express a natural dualism of essences. I would claim, rather, that every such dualism is a makeshift affair, the product of a historical process involving countless factors, many of them extremely arbitrary. (This history is not past, but still active as a sediment shaping present use). As such, it would be surprising if such dualisms obeyed a simple logic, and could be applied without ever generating paradoxes or other problems. As long as we assumed that they were logically unobjectionable, and avoided pushing them to the limit—that is, investigating cases where their apparent decidability breaks down—they *would* in fact seem to be exactly that. However, any really deep investigation, observational or conceptual, would lead to problems.

“Let us not just *assume* that *a* and *not-a*, pleasure and unpleasure, love and hate, sexual love and non-sexual love are utterly distinct, but try to investigate their real distribution and relation to each other.” As we saw above, we then find situations in which *a* and *not-a* are indistinguishable, or almost so; where the paradigm case of *a* suddenly seems to be more of a *not-a* than an *a*; or where *a*, even though not in danger of being confused with *not-a*, can nevertheless be transformed into it, and so forth.

One of the “arbitrary factors” we referred to above is the fact that concepts are expressed in some one natural language rather than another.468 For instance, the conceptual pair “satisfied”/

---

468 What in Strachey’s SE translation sound like highly technical terms, deriving any meaning they have from the specialised use Freud makes of them, in German are frequently familiar, everyday words, for

*footnote ctd. on next page—*
“unsatisfied” in English has a different value from its closest German equivalent, “befriedigt”/“unbefriedigt”. The former pair has a relationship with “sated” which the latter pair doesn’t; the latter a relationship with “Friede”—peace—which the former doesn’t. An English speaker could enquire after the relation between “satisfaction” and “pleasure”, a German speaker seeking to mimic this move would enquire after the relation between “Befriedigung” and “Lust”—“Lust” is undecided between (something like) “desire” and (something like) “pleasure”. The German speaker could decide that “Lust” is the name of one phenomenon which is both a pleasure and a desiring, or he could decide that it is ambiguous between two very different phenomena: desire and pleasure, or desire and satisfaction. (Freud opts for the latter gloss). If we assume, for argument’s sake, that “befriedigt”/“unbefriedigt” expresses a perfect dualism, which can simply be applied, without ever having to be relativised or otherwise problematised, its closest English counterpart, “satisfied”/“unsatisfied”, would certainly not be such a perfect dualism, because it follows a different logic. The English and German terms do not pull in the same direction.

A definition draws boundaries around a term. It clarifies the term by telling us what it isn’t. Definitions (in this strict sense) are therefore closely related to dichotomous thinking. As often as not, terms in natural language are ill-defined, deriving their meaning from an indefinite cluster of paradigmatic phenomena to which they typically apply, rather than from a definition. A criterion for settling borderline cases is usually not available, except in specialised uses (e.g. law) where such criteria are needed and have therefore been developed over time. (Even there judges and court cases do not become redundant, because these criteria leave so much open).

Borderline cases—things which straddle categories that we usually consider to be exclusive—tend to be associated with anxiety (or with humour, when we let go of our striving to control the world in the light of our specific concerns). We avoid them. The first thing we want to know when we are dealing with a person, is whether they are male or female. Similarly, in all sorts of situations we are concerned whether a person is friend or foe (American or Vietcong), one of us (Whites, Protestants, Afrikaner nationalists, or, as the case may be, right-minded analytic philosophers) or one of them (Blacks, Jews, Catholics, Commies, renegade Afrikaners, or, as the case may be, postmodern irrationalists). When confronted with the borderline, we tend to perceive it as if it simply belonged to one or the other side of the border, and our needs and wishes tend to determine whether this will be the near side or the far side, inside or outside, us or them, self or other.

The paradigmatic position of the paradigmatic Freudian phenomenon is the in-between. Freud is often quite explicit about this: people cannot be classified and understood satisfactorily in terms
of just one pole of any conceptual dualism: male or female, neurotic or non-neurotic, perverse or non-perverse, normal or abnormal, adult or infant.

The serious, competent philosopher (or psychologist, or neurologist) finds an institutional matrix steering him or her away from the borderline between his discipline and others. Freud’s models, however, typically do not choose between putatively exclusive disjunctions: does the “Project” give us a neurological model of the brain, or a psychological model of the mind? Is sexuality a natural or a cultural phenomenon? Does it demonstrate the unfolding towards a natural telos, or the interaction between an anarchic beginning and attempts by culture to regulate this anarchy to some extent? Is it a biological or a psychological phenomenon? Must “perversions” be explained in terms of heredity or environment? Similarly, constituent psychological phenomena are often undecidable in terms of our conventional, received concepts and conceptual dichotomies: “‘Instinct’ [Trieb] appears to us as a concept on the frontier between the mental and the somatic” (1915c—SE XIV: 121-122); we cannot always tell whether something should be called desire or satisfaction, pleasure or displeasure, love or hate, sexual or non-sexual love. (Although Freud makes categorical pronouncements about whether something is sexual or not, libidinal or not, and tries to distinguish sublimation from non-sublimated expressions of sexuality, we have tried to show that according to his arguments and textual practice such questions, wherever they become pressing, cannot be strictly decidable).

As far as its epistemological status is concerned, Freudian psychoanalysis also takes an in-between position. Unlike those who, à la Wollheim, see it as fundamentally correct, and those who, à la Erwin (1996), think it deserves to be consigned to the flames, my own position is that it is a mixture of blindness and insight. Sometimes it seems to be clearly the one; sometimes clearly the other, but often we do not know, or after closer inspection decide that there must be method (insight) in what initially seemed to be madness (blindness). Is Freud a scientist or a novelist? A meticulous observer or a brazen speculator? An empirical investigator, or a mythmaker? A psychologist or a conquistador? Is he philosophically hopeless, a confuser of every category he touches, the inferior of the average first year student in analytic philosophy? Or is he philosophically unusually sophisticated, a deconstructivist avant la lettre, surprisingly alert to the fact that his metaphors are metaphors, and convinced of the provisionality of every concept? Is he basically dogmatic, or rather an astute epistemologist who is deeply aware of the incompleteness and provisionality of his theory, as well as the role assumptions, fictions and constructs play in it? Does Freud with utter logic undermine the positions he opposes, and advance his own? Or is he just a master of rhetoric, the art of persuasion? Sometimes the one, occasionally the other; often both, simultaneously.

Continuing this reading of Freud, the central Freudian phenomenon becomes neither the unconscious nor the (pre)conscious, but the interface between them—the compromise between showing and hiding—for which he uses the metaphor of censorship. Is the subject aware of his unconscious, or ignorant of it? Both and neither. Is the dream, as described by Freud, a form of
representation? Kaum—that is: “hardly”, or “just barely”. Is Freud’s description of the dream a form of representation? Kaum. (p. 145) Both fall on the boundary of what is, and what is not, a representation, and thereby show how problematic the notion of “representation” is.

Does Freud know the unconscious? Is he ignorant of it? Both, and neither. He interprets it. Is meaning discovered, or is it invented? Both and neither: it is interpreted. Are the meanings produced by psychoanalysis historical truths, or current inventions? Are they the result of a cognitive process: the work of analysis, or of a social one which necessarily exceeds the limits of the cognitive: the struggle between the analyst and the analysand? Partly the one, partly the other; never quite the one, and usually not exclusively the other, either. Psychoanalysis is essentially hermeneutic, which means it cannot be securely located in either of the poles of dualisms such as these.

“LET US SPEAK OPENLY, PROFUSELY AND CONFIDENTLY ABOUT ALTERITY”

Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent. (Wittgenstein 1985: 189, §7)

I have spoken at length about a topic I should according to some accounts have remained silent about. (I have of course in fact not spoken, but written—mostly silently).

Moreover, one of my central conclusions is exactly that alterity is not some separate topic for mystical silence, but something permeating the things we speak about. Instead of a neat division between a non-other world about which one can speak confidently and adequately, and an alterity about which one cannot speak, but can safely and confidently remain silent, both speech and silence will generally be inadequate to the world and to alterity. Whether we speak or remain silent, add our writings to the mountain of academic overproduction or not, we will not have responded adequately to the world, or to alterity. The notion of “alterity” to me is first and foremost a placeholder for this necessary failure.

Respect for alterity requires

1. that we become aware—partly or fitfully, if need be—that our dreams of complete success are futile;
2. that we are prepared to acknowledge this failure, even if only partly and intermittently;
3. that we do not deny any partial successes that may have been achieved—these are the only successes to be had;
4. that we take cognisance of, and responsibility for, our separate failures, and try to remedy them;
5. that we strive to respond to these failures with patience, courage, imagination and humour; and, finally,
6. that we do not become oppressed by this failure, which means we also have to learn to experience the alterity escaping from our grasp as something numinous and to let go of the norm that we could and should have been successful.

The necessary failure from which we cannot escape is partly tragic, partly comic, and often both, simultaneously.

**HOW NECESSARY IS THE NOTION OF A NECESSARY FAILURE?**

We have made much of the notion of necessary failure, which can be applied at various levels in the study of Freud’s texts. Failure, however, is in the eye of the beholder. What from one perspective is a failure, from another is a success (admitting that one’s attempts at constructing a general theory of play have failed, can be an epistemological success), or something to which the terms success and failure do not apply (the free associations produced in psychoanalysis). It is characteristic for Freud’s model that he sees what generally are seen simply as failures, as simultaneously being successes. A failure to respect alterity, a failure in terms of the reality principle, is typically a success for the unconscious. A failure for the preconscious is a success for the unconscious’s striving to express itself by gaining access to consciousness and motility. This notion of the failure that is simultaneously a success is encapsulated in Freud’s term *Fehlleistung*—a success in failure.

Your child dies, because existing knowledge and technology have not been applied carefully. Your mother dies, because existing medical knowledge and technology have no cure for her illness. Your best friend is only able to love somebody when this love is unrequited. You yourself are desperately unhappy, and somehow drive your children to depression or suicide by communicating to them that they are worthless if they aren’t high achievers, and worthless if they are. Nations try to settle their differences through war, which causes untold victims, even on the winning side; those attempting to understand and prevent war, make but little headway. There is a lot of suffering in this world, justifying strenuous efforts at avoiding it or curtailing it. In the face of such suffering, we are not inclined to say: hurrah for human inscrutability, what a wonderful thing that there is an alterity resisting our attempts at understanding and control. We cannot afford sneering at the desire for *Beherrschung*, inasmuch as *Beherrschung* can prevent or alleviate such suffering. When one’s aim is prediction and control, alterity confronts one with failure: the limits at which understanding, prediction and control break down. It could then seem that *Beherrschung* is something we could never have too much of.

Thanks to Heidegger, the Frankfurt School, Foucault and popular comparisons between an unspecified, imperfectly understood “Western” rationality and an unspecified, imperfectly understood “Eastern” thought, *Beherrschung* has had a bad press. Of course when it means the domination of others to obtain one’s own ends, reservations are appropriate; often even when it is the domination of others to achieve *their* ends (for instance, health, an education, success), or the
ruthless domination of oneself to achieve the ends one has set for oneself. However, the world not being the Garden of Eden, it has to be controlled in many ways for us to survive and achieve all manner of other valid aims going beyond this. The ecologically sensitive Khoi-San, Native American or Buddhist monk, who are typically presented as embodying the opposite of an attempt to dominate the world, are still exerting control over the world and their own lives. If their world view and practices differ from those typical of the West, this difference does not lie in the absence of control. It is therefore not so easy to tell where domination is something justified and necessary, and where its excesses begin.

To return to psychoanalysis: here we have the suffering analysand—the patient, in the original meaning of the word. The expectation from various sides is that his psychoanalysis will relieve his suffering. According to a scientistic interpretation of psychoanalysis, the suffering will be removed because psychoanalysis, using a scientific theory of the mind, gives a true interpretation of his dreams, symptoms and associations produced in analysis. True knowledge opens the way to (self-)control. Where psychoanalysis strikes upon something that it is unable to interpret, there it fails. Alterity is the enemy of this process, and the index of the failure of psychoanalysis.

However, another interpretation of psychoanalysis is possible, in which alterity need not signify failure. This approach gives full scope to the unpredictability—the alterity—of the future. It comes closer to the Buddhist stress on the transience of all things, which is perceived to demand a focus on moment-to-moment awareness rather than propositional knowledge. The aim and touchstone of psychoanalysis is not the production of true, discursive knowledge. Analysis results in the analysand’s self-concept becoming more fluid, rather than her getting some fixed, articulate self-knowledge, which amounts to a form of self-definition. Psychoanalysis is a process in which the person learns to attend to the constantly changing “surface of [her] mind at any given moment” [jeweilige psychische Oberfläche—1911e—SE XII: 92; GW 8: 351] with awareness, flowing with it instead of fleeing from it in rigid, abstract and oversimplified self-definations.

Because of the constant changes in this surface, yesterday’s interpretation, however valid then, cannot take the place of this flow. This flow is produced before it is known or understood. “Awareness” does not require knowledge or understanding. The alterity of that of which one is aware, does not signal a failure of awareness. This moment-to-moment awareness over time does partly lead to an implicit, dispositional knowledge: being familiar with the fact that surprising changes of aspect occur in the course of an analysis; becoming less dislocated by the vehemence of feelings you didn’t know you had; getting acquainted with recesses of your own mind that before had just reluctantly been glimpsed from the corner of your mental eye.

From time to time it even has spin-offs that take the form of knowledge that can be discursively formulated. Mostly, this will just be a certain open-ended notion of one’s desires, anxieties, default responses to disappointment, recurrent ‘themes’ in dreams and relationships, and so on, combined with a capacity to become aware of one’s thoughts and actions, whether they take a
familiar form or not. However, propositional knowledge is not its central aim or achievement. The analysand’s moment-to-moment awareness of her own mental surface is matched by the analyst’s free-floating attention to it. Freed of metaphors which make us conceive of consciousness as a space containing contents we are fully conscious of, and the unconscious as a space containing contents we are not aware of at all, this awareness \([\text{Bewusst-sein}]\) is one in which what one is aware of does not lose its alterity.

This is not the glaring interrogator’s light of a consciousness in which everything is completely visible, which is to say, exhausted by its currently seen aspect, and in which nothing casts a shadow, has a far side, or an inside, a past and a future which transcend what can currently be seen or known of it. The unconscious, alterity, the aspects one is not aware of, therefore announce themselves “inside” awareness or, better, announce themselves in terms which cannot be safely located either within awareness, or outside it. One can revert to using the term “consciousness” for this awareness, as long as one keeps conceiving of it in these terms, rather than as a space with fully visible contents.

If “mental contents” never lose their far side and inside, we need no longer see the non-visibility of their far side and inside (and of all the aspects under which their visible side could appear, but momentarily doesn’t) as necessarily a sign of failure.

According to this reading, in psychoanalysis everyday awareness is not replaced by scientific knowledge of a totally different order. The psychoanalysed subject does not lose her alterity and become predictable. In everyday life this alterity and unpredictability are such an intrinsic feature of human reality that they will seldom be read as indicating failure on the part of an epistemological subject.

So, though we often suffer from the unpredictability and alterity of ourselves, others, and reality in general, they are an intrinsic part of the life we do so much to safeguard by reducing unpredictability and alterity—without them it would not be worth safeguarding. Derrida’s words (in Mortley 1991: 106) come to mind: “The event is such only insofar as it cannot be programmed

\[\footnote{Inasmuch as there is self-knowledge, this consists more in a sense that “nothing human is alien to me”, than an exclusive conception of the self, as non-a, non-b, etc. (Usually what is negated in such exclusive conceptions are characteristics the subject does not want to possess). Compare the way in which philosophical understanding (for instance in the Socratic tradition) often decreases our “knowledge”, our certainties, our confidence in the correctness of our definitions and beliefs. Ideally, philosophy and psychoanalysis should both increase our awareness of, and respect for, alterity.}

\[\footnote{Experience … showed that the attitude which the analytic physician could most advantageously adopt was to surrender himself to his own unconscious mental activity, in a state of evenly suspended attention, to avoid as far as possible reflection and the construction of conscious expectations, not to try to fix anything that he heard particularly in his memory, and by these means to catch the drift of the patient’s unconscious with his own unconscious. (1923a—SE XVIII: 239)}\]
and therefore anticipated. That’s what provokes thought. And that’s what provokes philosophy.”

To allow the event is to affirm jeu [both play and game], with its admission of non-mastery. Complete knowledge and complete control would make humour, play and adventure both impossible and unnecessary. One of the central foci of humour is the shipwreck of our projects of control. (Even wordplay requires the pleasurable-unpleasurable giddiness that we experience when words do not latch onto reality in the way needed where language is part of our strategies of control). The pleasures of play and adventure are only possible inasmuch as we embrace far-reaching limitations on our ability to control our situation.

Next to its tragic and anxious sides, psychoanalysis invites irony, humour, playfulness and adventure. From moment to moment, to follow the fundamental rule and express whatever enters your mind produces neither knowledge nor control. Inasmuch as, with time, psychoanalysis does give us a certain type of knowledge and a certain increase in control over our life, this has not been obtained through the instrumental activity usually associated with scientific knowledge and control. The analysand simply follows the fundamental rule, regardless of whether it seems to be leading anywhere, and from time to time the analyst offers interpretations of what results from this, typically without aiming at any specific behavioural changes. This requires and fosters an unusual degree of tolerance for alterity: that which appears to be without meaning, point, relevance, rationality, function or other value. At no point is all this material brought into a grand synthesis, retrospectively showing that in the work of analysis everything real was rational, and that in the realm of knowledge and control into which psychoanalysis has led us, the triad of play, humour and a sense of adventure have become redundant. Wherever projects of absolute knowledge and complete control necessarily fail, this triad is required to see that the failure of these projects is not equivalent to failure tout court. Sometimes the stakes involved are small, so that it is easy to be humorous, playful or adventurous. Where the stakes get high—a wrecked marriage or terminal illness—it is difficult, but therefore even more important, not to reject humour, play and adventure.

The analyst’s contribution to this process does not all lie at the level of knowledge or interpretations which can be correct or incorrect. There is also the element of listening as such, linked as it is to suspending judgement. To be able to say everything that enters into your mind and have it listened to without snap interpretations, moral judgements or practical advice is in itself a transforming experience. As is a relationship in which the other is reliable, makes no promises that are not kept, is truthful, and does not reward or punish one for what one says.\footnote{In a sustained analysis, there is bound to be many a lapse from these descriptions. However, an analysis can and should be far closer to the ideal-type described here than the analysand is likely to experience in other relationships.}

The cognitive content of the analytic relationship may be subordinate to its ethical content:
Psycho-analytic treatment is founded on truthfulness. In this fact lies a great part of its educative effect and ethical value. (1915a—SE XII: 164)
# BIBLIOGRAPHY

**NOTE:**

All references to “SE” in the text and bibliography are to the following edition of Freud’s complete works in English (An example: “SE XII: 73” refers to volume 12, page 73):


All references to “GW” in the text and bibliography are to the following edition of Freud’s complete works in German (An example: “GW 12: 73” refers to volume 12, page 73):


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>


Freud, Sigmund & 1895d. Studies on hysteria. SE II. (G: Studien über Hysterie. GW 1: 75-312)
Breuer, Josef.


Freud, Sigmund. 1901b. The psychopathology of everyday life. SE VI. (G: Zur Psychopathologie des Alltägsliebens. GW 4)

Freud, Sigmund. 1904a. Freud’s psychoanalytic procedure. SE VII: 247-254. (G: Die Freudsche psychoanalytische Methode. GW 5: 3-10)


Freud, Sigmund. 1911b. Formulations on the two principles of mental functioning. SE XII: 213-226 (G: Formulierungen über die zwei Prinzipien des psychischen Geschehens. GW 8: 229-238)

Freud, Sigmund. 1912d. On the universal tendency to debasement in the sphere of love. SE XI: 177-190. (G: Über die allgemeinste Erniedrigung des Liebeslebens. GW 8: 78-91)

Freud, Sigmund. 1912e. Recommendations to physicians practising psycho-analysis. SE XII: 109-120. (G: Ratschläge für den Arzt bei der psychoanalytischen Behandlung. GW 8: 375-387)


Freud, Sigmund. 1915e. The unconscious. SE XIV: 159-204. (G: Das Unbewusste. GW 10: 263-321)

Freud, Sigmund. 1916-17a. Introductory lectures on psycho-analysis. SE XV-XVI. (G: Vorlesungen zur Einführung in die Psychoanalyse. GW 11)


Freud, Sigmund. 1920g. Beyond the pleasure principle. SE XVIII: 1-64. (G: Jenseits des Lustprinzips. GW 13: 1-69)


Freud, Sigmund. 1925i. Some additional notes on dream-interpretation as a whole. SE XIX: 123-138. (G: Einige Nachträge zum Ganzen der Traumdeutung. GW 1: 559-573)

Freud, Sigmund. 1926d. Inhibitions, symptoms and anxiety. SE XX: 75-175. (G: Hemmung, Symptom und Angst. GW 14: 111-205)

Freud, Sigmund. 1926e. The question of lay analysis. SE XX: 177-258. (G: Die Frage der Laienanalyse. GW 14: 207-296)


Freud, Sigmund. 1928b. Dostoevsky and parricide. SE XXI: 177-196. (G: Dostojewski und die Vatertötung. GW 14: 399-418)


Freud, Sigmund. 1933a. New introductory lectures on psycho-analysis. SE XXII: 1-182. (G: Neue Folge der Vorlesungen zur Einführung in die Psychoanalyse. GW 15)


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Publisher Details</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>


LYRICS:

INDEX (Pages no longer valid for PDF)

A special type of choice of object made by men (1910b), 268, 273, 276, 277, 278, 283
Achterhuis, Hans, 15, 16, 26, 236, 237
activity/passivity, 196, 211, 231, 265, 267
actual neurosis, 301
adventure, 226, 228, 260, 338, 345, 346
aesthetics, 238, 241, 248, 249, 281, 313, 337
affect
  transformation of, 105
affectionate current, 193, 231, 269–276, 284, 287, 288, 310, 324–326
Afrikaans, 11, 13, 14, 239
Afrikaners, 11, 12, 14, 151, 331, 332, 340
agencies, 86, 92, 95, 118, 150
alterity
  acknowledging, 245, 266, 269, 293–298, 327, 338
  doing justice to, 29, 31, 321, 324, 336
  notions of radical a. in Western thought, 151
  respect for, 320, 321, 343
Amacher, P., 40, 44
ambivalence, 96, 115, 194, 215, 245, 267, 283, 312
America, 340
American, Native, 343
analog, 332, 333
Analysis of a phobia in a five-year old boy (1909b—Little Hans case), 255
Analysis terminable and interminable (1937c), 26, 147, 162, 166, 167, 170–173, 200, 229, 245
Anaximander, 219
Andersson, Ola, 44
Andreas-Salomé, Lou, 201
anthropology, 190, 238, 306, 315
anticathexis, 105
anti-Semitism, 28, 226
anxiety, 28, 97, 99, 191, 207, 236, 294, 296, 340, 346
Aphasia (1888b), 40
Arbeit, 104, 148, 166, 328
Aristotle, 34, 161
ars amandi, 225, 249
Artificial Intelligence, 65, 71, 76
aspect, change of, 125, 126, 162, 179, 295, 328
association, free, 128, 140, 343
asymmetry between analyst and analysand, 171–73
atomism, 72, 84, 155, 182, 184
attention, (evenly) suspended, 345
Austin, John, 206
autarky, 17
auto-erotism, 37, 203, 204, 214, 254–260, 266, 267, 322
autonomy, 14–16, 25, 236, 237, 248, 337
awareness, 50, 61, 167, 181, 190, 207, 230, 258, 272, 297, 315, 344, 345
Barth, Karl, 318
beaux yeux dream, 130, 131
Berlin, 40, 186
Bersani, Leo, 37, 192, 196, 214, 218, 222, 224, 229, 230, 251, 260, 262, 276, 295, 303–321, 326, 336
Beyond the pleasure principle (1920g), 49, 224, 266, 308–310, 330
Bieber, I., 203
bisexuality, 106, 140, 190, 196, 286, 333
Bleuler, Eugen, 267
Bloch, Iwan, 226, 238
Boas, George, 269, 271
Bonaparte, Princess Marie, 40
Bosnia, 33
Bouveresse, Jacques, 289
Breton, André, 315
Breuer, Josef, 77, 107, 164, 179
bricolage, 20, 22, 125, 145, 328
Buddhism, 29, 35, 104, 148, 174, 343, 344
Zen, 171, 244, 294, 295
Carroll, Lewis, 25
catachresis, 22
Cavafy, Constantin, 33
censorship, 36, 86–96, 107, 115–122, 129, 135, 141, 142, 144, 149, 150, 321, 323, 334, 341
Certeau, Michel de, 34
Chang, Jolan, 315
Chinese script, 140
Chomsky, Noam, 71, 143
Christianity, 29, 35, 149, 174, 244, 269
Cilliers, F.P., 34, 35, 42, 65–71
civilisation, 226, 286, 306
Civilization and its discontents (1930a), 3, 26, 34, 208, 262, 286, 287, 309, 310, 331
Cixous, Hélène, 34
cloaca, 198, 202, 296, 299, 337
cloaca, 201, 264, 337
Eros, 259, 263, 269, 271, 305, 312, 315, 324, 325, 336
Erwin, Edward, 21, 204, 341
essentialism, 221, 233, 307, 314
ethnocentrism, 28, 174
excrement, 163, 239, 240, 270, 331
exhibitionism, 211, 218, 238, 251-254, 262
Fechner, Gustav Theodor, 86
Fedor, Ernst, 249
fellatio, 187, 238
fiction, 104, 170, 172
Fisher, Seymour, 256
Fiarmara, Gemma Corradi, 136
fixation, 217, 234, 235, 253, 256, 262, 280, 289
Fliess, Wilhelm, 39, 40, 42, 45, 46, 159, 166, 191, 208, 302
Fodor, Jerry, 66
Forrester, John, 167
Foucault, Michel, 34, 167, 179, 241, 293, 303, 304, 305, 315, 317, 343
Fragment of an analysis of a case of hysteria (1905—Dora case), 124, 162, 163, 165, 169, 247, 263, 299
Frankfurt School, 343
From the history of an infantile neurosis (1918b—Wolfman case), 94, 162, 180, 244
fundamental rule, 127, 128, 129, 329, 346
Galatea, 326
Gay, Peter, 124, 166, 189, 208, 271, 287, 301, 302
Gehirn (1888b), 40, 41, 43, 48
generalisations, 20, 21, 36, 95, 301, 323, 332, 338
genital stage or organisation, 253, 268
German, 11, 17, 19, 50, 55, 92, 93, 106, 112, 124, 128, 142, 157, 186, 189, 200, 224, 225, 250, 272, 276, 282, 287, 291, 310, 339
Gesammelte Werke, 17, 154
Gill, M.M, 42
Gilman, Sander, 277
Girard, René, 279
Gombrich, Ernst, 133
Gouws, Andries, 16, 143, 151
Greenberg, Roger P., 256
Grolier, 65
Grünbaum, Adolf, 93, 175, 204
Guattari, Félix, 163, 317
Habermas, Jürgen, 62
hallucination, 54, 57, 89, 101, 103, 144, 163, 164
Hamlet, 32, 99, 156
happiness, 208, 248, 260, 326
harmony, 16, 237, 269, 311
hate, 27, 28, 37, 196, 266, 267, 306, 309, 311, 312, 324, 339, 341
Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich, 308
Heidegger, Martin, 148, 316, 343
helplessness, 37, 53, 74, 272
Heraclitus, 120
Herbart, Johann Friedrich, 47
Hesiod, 269
heterogeneity, 18, 21, 84, 124, 135, 142, 144, 145, 146, 149, 165, 178, 197, 198, 204, 205, 209, 213, 215, 221, 225, 241, 316, 327
Hinduism, 35
Hitler, Adolf, 264
Hoche, Alfred, 226
holism, 84, 180, 182, 330, 333
Hollywood, 315
Holt, R., 40, 70
humour, 340, 342, 345, 346
hunger, 47, 53, 55, 80, 82, 194, 199, 202, 205, 206, 208, 210, 224
Husserl, Edmund, 63
hypercatheixis, 103, 118
hypotheses, auxiliary, 108, 220, 292
Ibsen, Henrik, 131
Id, 55, 329, 339
ideal types, 119, 168, 186, 334, 335
identification and disidentification, 28, 63, 64, 75, 120, 266, 280, 299, 301, 309, 317, 331
identity, perceptual or thought, 103, 106
ignorance, 34, 148, 167, 264, 290, 294, 296, 302
imitation, 63
in-between, the, 338, 339, 340, 341
incest, 275, 280, 325
incorporation, 129, 266
ineffable, the, 316, 317
Ingleby, David, 163
inhibition, 51, 56, 57, 58, 60, 62, 103, 104, 106, 107, 116, 142, 256
Inhibitions, symptoms and anxiety (1926d), 294
inside/outside, 14, 22
integrity, sexual, 279, 281, 282, 325, 335
| interaction | 78, 90, 113, 119, 146, 147, 148, 153, 167, 174, 175, 185, 216, 228, 240, 332, 338, 340 |
| interdependence | 332, 338 |
| interface | 78, 80, 322, 341 |
| introjection | 28, 94, 317, 331 |
| Irigaray, Luce | 34 |
| Isbister, J.N. | 40 |
| Islam | 318 |
| Israëls, Han | 93 |
| itching | 199, 205, 206, 207, 224 |
| Jackson, John Hughlings | 41, 45 |
| Jameson, Frederic | 31 |
| Jones, Ernest | 33 |
| Judaism | 12, 16, 28, 29, 35, 150, 174, 298, 318 |
| Jung, Carl Gustav | 149, 157, 158, 187, 330 |
| Kafka, Franz | 265 |
| *Kama Sutra* | 249 |
| *Ding an sich* | 75, 109, 181, 318 |
| Kant, Immanuel | 29, 75, 79, 80, 109, 151, 160, 161, 181, 192, 297, 318 |
| Kanzer, M. | 43 |
| Kauer, Robert | 193 |
| Kaufmann, Walter | 52 |
| Kearney, Richard | 24 |
| Kerr, John | 140 |
| kerygma | 174, 304 |
| Khoi-San | 343 |
| Kienhorst, Ineke | 248 |
| Kirk, G.S. | 120 |
| kissing | 238, 261 |
| Klein, George S. | 143 |
| Klín, Paul | 21 |
| Krafft-Ebing, Richard von | 227, 313 |
| Kristeva, Julia | 34 |
| Kuhn, Thomas | 194 |
| Kundry, 16 |
| Labarrière, Pierre-Jean | 24 |
| Lacan, Jacques | 15, 34, 63, 125, 183, 200, 248, 280, 287, 303, 317 |
| language | 58, 78, 109 |
| and consciousness | 112 |
| origins of | 59 |
| language games | 21, 22, 146, 165, 167, 212, 229, 328, 338 |
| Laplanche, Jean | 139, 140, 177, 211, 265, 266, 303, 307 |
| latent dream-thoughts | 95, 125, 129-132, 137, 141, 153, 155, 162, 176, 177, 178, 181-185, 187, 188, 328, 336 |
| Levinas, Emmanuel | 11, 14-17, 20, 22, 24, 29, 34, 37, 125, 151, 160, 258-260, 269, 305, 306, 315, 318, 321, 324-326 |
| on Eros | 258 |
| Lévi-Strauss, Claude | 145, 240 |
| liberalism | 35, 174 |
| libido | 37, 170, 189, 190, 193, 194, 199, 200, 202, 205, 208-222, 227, 238, 252, 253-256, 265-267, 269, 288, 289, 290, 292, 318, 323, 335, 337, 338 |
| pertinacity of | 278 |
| plasticity of | 216, 217 |
| Lindsay, Wallace | 193 |
| Lipps, Theodor | 109, 160, 181 |
| listening | 125, 165, 183, 224, 249, 294, 329, 346 |
| localisationism | 22, 42, 64, 69, 72, 79, 307, 334 |
| love | 239, 241, 268 |
| and hate closely related | 266, 311 |
| being in | 172, 193, 268, 269, 274, 325 |
| being in | 268 |
| Luria, Alexander | 42 |
| Lyotard, Jean-François | 34, 303 |
| Macmillan, Malcolm | 19, 203, 204, 277 |
| Mahoney, Patrick | 285, 288 |
| male and female | 37, 196, 217, 256, 285, 337, 340 |
| Mancia, M. | 43 |
| manifest dream (content) | 95, 129-136, 130, 131, 132, 141, 144-146, 155, 157, 160, 176, 177, 178, 181-188, 336 |
| Marx, Karl | 35, 112, 167, 174 |
| Masson, Jeffrey | 40 |
| master of suspicion | Freud as a, 271, 324 |
| masturbation | 133, 206, 209, 241 |
| McClelland, J.L. | 65, 68, 70 |
| McGraw, William J. | 44 |
| Meltzer, Françoise | 140 |
| memory | 48-50, 54-56, 58, 59, 61, 62, 66, 71, 74, 75, 78-83, 88-90, 102, 103, 110, 129, 168, 169, 279, 293, 301, 333, 345 |
| first conscious memories are unpleasant ones | 59 |
| metaphors | military, 166 |
| spatial m. for psychic apparatus | 88 |
| metaphysics | 24, 66, 199, 286, 312 |
| Western | 14, 22, 24, 321 |
| metapsychology | 17, 39, 40, 42, 44, 84, 108, 121, 217, 222, 223, 228, 308 |
| Meynert, Theodor | 40, 41, 42 |
| Mitchell, Stephen | 294 |
| monism | 78, 330 |
| Monk, Ray | 277 |
| Mootij, Anton | 15 |
morality, 115, 237, 241, 248, 322
Mortley, Raoul, 35, 345
mother, 54, 73, 139, 156, 170, 180, 201, 204, 208, 260, 261, 262, 271, 272, 274-278, 280, 281-283, 310, 324, 326, 335, 343
mysticism, 151
Naess, Arne, 321
narcissism, 13, 17, 245, 255, 256, 261, 269, 290, 310, 311, 324
nature, 152, 238
Nazism, 16
needs, 47
Neurath, Otto, 22
neurology, 17, 39-45, 56, 68-72, 76, 81, 86, 101, 102, 126, 340
neuropsychology, 42-44, 69
New introductory lectures on psycho-analysis (1933a), 126, 171, 200, 329
Newman, Randy, 270
Nietzsche, Friedrich, 52, 61, 74, 93, 95, 271, 317
normality and abnormality, 37, 190, 196, 229, 230, 233, 244, 245, 247, 340
Noy, J., 143
nuisance, 30, 140, 237
numinous, the, 30, 32, 326, 342
Nunberg, Herman, 249
object, importance of, 37, 204, 251, 254, 255
object-choice, anaclitic or narcissistic, 261, 324, 339
objectivity, 14, 21, 31, 153, 173, 180, 238, 279, 304, 330
bias, 199, 255, 293, 330
object-libido, 212, 221, 252
Oedipus complex, 217, 241, 242, 256, 280, 283, 287, 302, 303
On dreams (1901a), 33, 128, 130, 131, 133, 140, 156, 157, 166, 176
On narcissism (1914c), 324
On the universal tendency to debasement in the sphere of love (1912d), 163, 244, 268, 269, 273, 274, 277, 283, 286
organisation of the libido, 193, 253, 256, 265, 267, 318
Orwell, George, 198
Ostow, Mortimer, 41, 44, 47
Ostow, Mortimer, 41, 44, 47
other minds, 63, 76, 147
condensation, 39, 84, 100, 102, 130, 131, 132, 137, 162, 178, 182, 183, 191, 202, 281
parapraxis, 115, 164, 186, 333
Parsifal, 16
pathology, 81, 170, 172, 196, 231, 233, 234, 235, 236, 237, 239, 244, 248, 337
Peirce, Charles Sanders, 186
Peperzak, Adriaan, 14
perfect solutions, 16, 26, 320
perversion, 106, 190, 192, 209, 210, 225, 227, 230-239, 244, 247, 249, 250, 252, 256, 263, 265, 268, 277, 278, 297, 300, 304, 337
phallus, 139, 140, 195, 200, 253, 257, 265, 315
phantasy, 136, 137, 138, 146, 149, 168, 186, 191, 195, 210, 229, 265, 279, 280, 283, 333
Phillips, Adam, 32
philosophy of science, 35, 204, 296, 317
pity, 237, 241, 261, 269, 325
Plato, 18, 19, 34, 80, 104, 195, 245, 263, 271, 277, 325, 335
pleasure
and unpleasure, 27, 36, 37, 46, 51, 52, 54-57, 60, 61, 63, 64, 69, 71, 74, 78, 82-84, 97, 98, 101, 103, 105, 111, 117, 142, 192, 205-207, 217, 218, 222-224, 228, 229, 291, 306, 308-311, 335, 339, 341
sexual, 199, 214, 224, 225, 226, 263, 265, 286, 303, 308, 310, 325, 335, 338
pleasure principle, 31, 49, 51, 54, 103, 105, 111, 117, 224, 229, 308, 310, 311, 335, 336
Poe, Edgar Allan, 121
polarisation, 13, 38, 245, 246, 281, 319, 326, 332, 337
politics, 11, 12, 24, 87, 92, 93, 115, 120, 122, 126, 133, 237, 247, 263, 304, 321, 323
pollution, 239, 275, 281
Pontalis, Jean-Baptiste, 139, 140, 177, 211, 265, 266
Pope, the, 243
Popper, Karl, 40, 93, 114, 147
postmodernism, 113, 174, 340
prejudice, 28, 32-34, 136, 154, 163, 237, 264, 325
presentations, word, 118
Pribram, Karl H., 42, 43
primary and secondary process, 57, 58, 99, 100, 119, 334
professions, impossible, 171, 180
Project for a scientific psychology (1950c), 35, 39, 46, 66, 92, 331
prostitutes, 276-285, 326, 335
Pygmalion, 326
quantum mechanics, 151
racism, 11, 28, 151, 239, 246, 320
Ranke, Leopold von, 152
rape, 241, 250, 252, 263, 299, 315
Raven, J.E., 120
reaction-formation, 99, 208, 211, 299
reality
external, 59, 81, 85
thought, 59, 60
unconscious true psychical r., 109
reality-testing, 57, 102
rebus, 133, 134, 135, 154, 155, 157
repetition, 37, 56, 58, 65, 74, 100-102, 167, 169-172, 193, 204, 206, 208, 223, 224, 259, 260-262, 271, 308, 311, 313, 315, 317, 318, 324, 325
regression, 61, 81, 83, 86, 89, 90, 91, 100, 256
Reich, Wilhelm, 314
remorse, 74, 82, 322
repetition
of series, 170
representation, 52, 142
Wittgenstein on Freud and, 142
revision, secondary, 136-138, 146, 181, 335
Ricoeur, Paul, 31, 43, 51, 73, 321
Rilke, Rainer Maria, 31
Robinson, T.M., 18
Rollins, C.D., 63, 73
Rorty, Richard, 152
Rumelhart, D.E., 65, 68, 70
Ryle, Gilbert, 15
Sachs, Hanns, 114
Sackeim, Harold A., 248
Sade, Marquis de, 309, 315
sadomasochism, 193, 218, 252, 253, 262, 263, 307, 313, 325
cruelty, 29, 37, 193, 207, 222, 241, 244, 251, 254, 262-264, 292, 324, 325
humiliation, 228, 252, 263, 313
masochism, 51, 106, 156, 210, 211, 222, 228, 229, 238, 252, 262-265, 307-309, 311, 313, 315, 318, 325
sadism, 106, 210, 211, 222, 235, 237, 252, 262-265, 269, 286, 287, 309, 311, 313, 318
Saling, Michael, 40, 41, 42, 43, 44, 70
Sartre, Jean-Paul, 320
satisfaction, 225, 228, 300, 340
experience of, 53-55, 76, 101, 103, 208
sexual, 194, 204, 206, 226, 227, 233, 251, 263, 276, 286, 287, 290, 300, 301, 325, 326, 338
never complete, 286
Saussure, Ferdinand de, 52, 65, 66, 67, 84, 132, 187, 215
scepticism, 21, 173, 296, 330
Schofield, M., 120
Schopenhauer, Arthur, 270
screen memories, 149, 168, 279
Screen memories (1899a), 279
secondary elaboration, 84, 130
self-analysis, 147, 173, 302, 320
selfing, 28, 331
self-reflexivity, 20, 175, 298, 329, 330
sexism, 28, 246, 263, 320
sexocentrism, 194, 215
sexology, XIXth Century, 189, 196, 230, 242, 293
sexual research, infantile, 298, 330
sexualisation, 324
Shakespeare, William, 99
silence, 94, 96, 151, 160, 163, 192, 263, 342
sociobiology, 285
Socrates, 34, 271, 277, 294, 344
solipsism, 73, 75-77, 92, 252, 322, 331
and symbiosis, 75
Ricoeur on "Project", 73
Solms, Mark, 40, 41, 42, 43, 44, 70
South Africa, 11, 12, 13, 14
Spanjaard, J., 143, 187, 188
Standard Edition, 17, 19, 45, 53, 154
stimulus shield, 49
Storr, Anthony, 164
Stroeken, Harry, 236, 247, 279
struggle, 22, 105, 108, 149, 166, 202, 259, 324, 328, 337, 341
Studies on hysteria (1895d), 26, 77, 79, 107, 148, 163
sublimation, 105, 207, 208, 210, 212, 216, 290, 313, 341
substitutability, 194, 198, 201, 209-211, 222, 254, 259
suffering, 13, 28, 29, 226, 236, 247, 248, 250, 259, 276, 309, 324, 337, 343, 344
Sulloway, Frank, 39, 43-46, 56, 164
super-ego, 98
supplement, 179
surrealism, 315
symbiosis, 75, 322, 323, 331
symbols, 74, 130, 135, 138-140, 145, 155-157, 253, 267
sympathy, 63, 74
symptoms, 90, 98, 100, 104-106, 115, 120, 157, 177, 185, 186, 210, 231, 233, 235, 250, 263, 288, 294, 344
systems, mnemonic, 54-58, 63, 87, 104, 111, 117

tabula rasa, 240
Taoism, 35, 249, 315
technique, writings on, 36, 166, 328
teleology, 69, 110, 227, 250, 260, 301, 303, 304, 317, 338
tension, sexual, 51, 205, 207, 223, 224, 226, 228, 308, 338
Terence, 193
Thales, 219
The ego and the id (1923b), 78, 119
The future of an illusion (1927c), 244
The interpretation of dreams (1901a), 17, 33, 35, 36, 39, 43, 45, 46, 54, 68, 69, 81, 82, 84, 86-88, 91, 92, 96, 98, 102, 104, 111, 112, 118, 120, 121, 124, 128-131, 133, 136, 139, 140, 142, 143, 146, 155-163, 166, 168, 176, 189, 209, 224, 255, 321, 322, 323, 327, 328, 333
The psychopathology of everyday life (1901b), 150
The question of lay analysis (1926e), 127, 166, 182
The unconscious (1915e), 79, 90, 95, 108, 109, 118, 119, 156, 157
theology, negative, 151, 318
things, 62, 63, 64, 75
thumb-sucking, 202-204, 251, 256, 257, 338
tradition, 22-24, 35, 60, 66, 85, 109, 151, 174, 192, 201, 230, 240, 344
Traumdeutung: See: The interpretation of dreams
truth, psychoanalytic, 306
under erasure, 22, 109, 314, 316, 339
unrepresentable, the, 315, 318, 327
vagina, 200-202, 226, 239, 251, 264, 296, 299, 337
Van den Bout, Jan, 248
Van Gogh, 21
Venus, 150, 201
Vico, Giambattista, 136
Vienna, 39, 40, 41, 71, 298
violence, 28, 130, 163, 263, 264, 299, 305, 310, 313, 315, 321, 325, 335
virtuality of psychical locality, 87

Wagner, Richard, 16
Wahrig, Gerhard, 282
watchman, 36, 91, 92, 93, 96, 115, 120, 121, 122, 149, 179, 323
Webster, Richard, 40
Weininger, Otto, 277
Weiss, Edoardo, 247
Welldon, Estela, 236, 248
Williams, Bernard, 341
Wollheim, Richard, 19, 39, 45, 49, 72, 112, 341
Zeldin, Theodore, 315
CURRICULUM VITAE

Andries Stefanus Gouws was born in Johannesburg (South Africa) on 22 January 1952. He matriculated in Bellville in 1968. From 1970 to 1974 he studied fine arts at art academies in Cape Town, Den Bosch (Netherlands), Düsseldorf and Amsterdam. At the same time he studied for a Bachelor’s Degree (1974) at the University of South Africa. In 1979 he completed his Master’s degree in philosophy *cum laude* at the University of Utrecht (Netherlands) with a thesis on Wittgenstein and Freud.

From 1979 till 1985 he was a lecturer in philosophy at a training college for social work in Rotterdam. He was attached to the Catholic University of Nijmegen for the whole of 1986, where he did contract research for the Dutch Ministry of Culture, Recreation and Social Work. From 1987 till 1990 he lectured in political philosophy at the University of Stellenbosch (South Africa). Since 1991 he has been Senior Lecturer in philosophy at the University of Natal in Durban.

He has previously published on welfare, postmodernism and literary theory.

The research for this thesis was conducted at the University for Humanist Studies, Utrecht, and the University of Natal, Durban.