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## FREUD AND EPICUREAN PHILOSOPHY: REVISITING DRIVE THEORY

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*Abstract.* This article reviews Epicurean philosophy to expose Freud's drive theory as overly quantitative and lacking a qualitative dimension. Epicurean philosophy is congruent with fundamental premises in psychoanalysis, and contributes a qualitative and quantitative theory of pleasure. Moreover, Epicurean philosophy is compatible with fundamental tenets within relational psychoanalysis, indicating that drive theory is relevant—and possibly constitutive—to the relational perspective. After reviewing Epicurean philosophy, the article returns to Freud's conceptualization of drive. Arguments are made against Freud's hypothesis of a death drive, insofar as Freud believed that organisms are motivated by the pursuit of pleasure in an isolated individualistic manner. The article maintains that a critical exploration of Epicureanism challenges our tendency to equate classical drive theory with material reductionism. This carries significant implications for contemporary psychoanalysis and its interpretation of the drives.

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*Keywords:* Epicurean philosophy, drive theory, pleasure principle, relational psychoanalysis

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### Introduction

Relational theorists have critiqued Freud's drive theory, arguing that interpersonal factors—not intrapsychic drives—define mental life. For example, Greenberg (1991) calls for the “radical rejection of drive [theory]” because “all motivation unfolds from our personal experience of exchange with others” (p. vii). Motivation theory certainly benefits from this

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reconceptualization: whereas motivation was once viewed as something one has or does not possess, it is now understood as a dynamic process that is influenced by one's relationship with another (Miller, 1994). Yet this argument is not without consequences. Drive theory is pivotal to psychoanalysis, and represents Freud's ongoing attempt to secure a solid philosophical foundation. Although psychoanalytic *practice* has unquestionably benefited from the relational turn, it does not appear that psychoanalytic *theory* (particularly of motivation) has benefited as much (Mills, 2005). This article maintains that the relational turn does have a firm theoretical basis, albeit in the most unexpected source—Freud's drive theory.

The notion of drive is central to Freud's conceptualization of psychoanalysis. From early formulations in his 1895 *Project* to the writings up to his death, Freud was deeply occupied with investigating the nature of drives and believed that it provided foundational concepts to the understanding of psychic life. Perhaps the most instructive text is *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920/2011; hereafter *BPP*), where Freud questions the nature of pleasure and what it signifies regarding the drives. In this text, Freud follows the logical consequences of the pleasure principle to make the surprising hypothesis that the goal of all organic life is death. However much controversy this hypothesis has triggered, the text establishes definitive theoretical scaffolding for psychoanalytic theory: all facets of psychic life are constituted by the pursuit of greater pleasurable states, or, synonymously, the reduction of unpleasurable ones. Yet, this definition fails to account for a fundamental dimension of human motivation. Freud's notion of pleasure is remarkably quantitative and ignores any qualitative dimension in this theoretical account.

This article postulates that quantitative and qualitative dimensions of pleasure are each significant and capture a different truth about pleasure. The quantitative concept identifies a fundamental nature concerning pleasure. In essence, this conceptualization of pleasure is unidimensional and holds that all pleasures share a common form, which could be increased or decreased in quantity. For example, this view of pleasure would postulate that the pleasures experienced in activities like walking and socializing are pleasurable because they share the same nature, and only differ in the quantity of pleasure each activity brings. In contrast, the qualitative concept is multidimensional, attuned to different types (natures) that are incomparable with and irreducible to each other. So, the pleasure experienced in walking and socializing are both pleasurable, yet they

may be pleasurable for different reasons. Hence, these two dimensions of pleasure suggest that one cannot be equated with the other without compromising precision about what one intends to describe about pleasure. This distinction is central to the arguments made in this article and will be further elaborated in subsequent sections.

In what follows, I will argue that a qualitative dimension of pleasure is presupposed in Freud's quantitative description. To this end, I turn to study Epicureanism, a school of ancient Greek philosophy that originated around 300 B.C.E and flourished for centuries after. Epicureanism was one of the first ancient schools to provide a theory of pleasure that is remarkably congruent with Freud's definition. Moreover, Epicurean philosophy was relational as well, simultaneously defining psychic life in quantitative and qualitative terms. After a review of Epicureanism, I will turn to Freud's account of pleasure and situate it within the Epicurean tradition. Those familiar with Freud's writings may wonder why we should discuss Epicureanism when he directly addresses other ancient philosophies. My reasons for doing so will be articulated later. In general, however, I believe that a critical exploration of Epicureanism challenges our tendency to equate classical drive theory with material reduction. This carries significant implications for contemporary psychoanalysis and its interpretation of the drives.

### **Epicurean Philosophy: A Relational Theory of Quantitative Pleasure**

Many commentators have pointed to similarities between ancient philosophy and psychoanalysis. Like Freud, ancient philosophers claimed that their philosophical "truths" could improve the quality of life. Henri Ellenberger (1970) writes:

It is often overlooked that in the Greco-Roman era the adoption of a philosophy did not imply merely the acceptance of a certain doctrine. The Pythagoreans, the Platonists, the Aristotelians, the Stoics, and the Epicureans, were not just adherents of "philosophical systems," but members of organized "schools," also called "sects," that imposed on them a specific method of training and a way of life. (p. 41)

In ancient Greece, philosophical disciples were required to "convert" to the way of life inspired by their philosophical vision. Philosophy was not a form of speculation, but a practical exercise intended to transform the lives of its followers. "Philosophy in the hands of the Hellenistic

thinkers,” writes Martha Nussbaum (1994), “no longer calmly contemplates the world: it plunges into the world, and becomes part of it” (p. 36).

Ancient philosophies were generally devised to alleviate psychological maladies and Epicureanism was no exception. Like other schools of the time, Epicureanism required disciples to study its philosophy by living it. In so doing, Epicureanism resembled a cult and its followers devoted the entirety of their lives to the philosophy. Many facts we know about the Epicurean tradition illustrate how devout its followers were: Epicureans were known to wear rings depicting their philosophical god, Epicurus; the Epicureans had their own publishing house to guarantee distribution of their philosophy; and the Epicureans were exacting about how philosophy was to be learned by requiring followers to take residence in “the Garden,” a commune where people would discuss and learn—or embody—the Epicurean truth.

The groundwork for all of Epicurean theory is rooted in the notion of *ataraxia*, the most desirable state of pleasure in organic life. The Epicureans argued that mental illness is caused by mistaken beliefs about pleasure; experiences are commonly perceived to be pleasurable when, in fact, they are not. To be sure, the Epicureans were not the first to argue that people hold false beliefs about pleasure. Plato argued this in the *Republic*, as did many others even earlier (see Gosling & Taylor, 1982). But Epicurus was the first who made pleasure central to the practice of philosophy. For Epicurus, pleasure, or *ataraxia*, is an absolute state of tranquility, a freedom from disturbance or agitation of the soul, which all organic life strives to achieve. This quantitative definition holds that experiences that lead to greater psychical tranquility are more pleasurable than ones that engender states of unrest. Yet this definition should not be confused with *apatheia*, the Stoic form of pleasure meaning “not feeling.” Both are states of pleasure defined negatively, yet the Epicureans do not recommend abolishing feelings altogether. *Ataraxia* is a form of pleasure to be sought and cultivated. Epicurus’ lesson was that pleasure is not the satisfaction of desire but the cultivation of a psychological skill that eliminates pain. He taught that the perpetual ambition for additional forms of pleasure is the reason for unsatisfied desires, thwarting one’s chance at attaining pure pleasure. As such, Epicureans do not deny that things like fine foods and drink are pleasurable. There is nothing inherently wrong in eating fine foods and drinking fine wine. Rather, the problem stems from the way we are pained to continually fulfill our demands for

such pleasures. *Ataraxia* refers to the careful control of desire, not the elimination of pleasure per se.<sup>1</sup>

Our knowledge of Epicurean philosophy comes from varied sources. We know very little about the philosophy through its founder's own words, as the only existing texts are letters and brief aphorisms collected by followers and historians. Epicurus (341–270 B.C.E.) lived after Plato and Aristotle in the philosophically aware Grecian world. As mentioned before, in Athens he established a philosophical commune (“the Garden”) that was a forerunner for the far-reaching Epicurean communities that flourished for centuries after his death. And because few primary works survive, the most complete source of Epicurus' teachings comes from a devoted student, Lucretius. Titus Lucretius Carus was a Roman poet who lived approximately between 99–55 B.C.E., two centuries after Epicurus taught in Athens. In the didactic poem, *The Nature of Things*, Lucretius presciently theorizes about a universe composed of “atoms,” the human process of coping with fear of death, the development of societies, the cause of war, the origins of language, and more. So predictive was it of modern scientific thought, *The New Yorker* (Greenblatt, 2011) recently published an article on the influence Lucretius' poem has had on pioneers like Darwin, Francis Bacon, and Shakespeare, among others. And although scholars once contested whether the poem accurately represents Epicurean philosophy, we now speak of Lucretius as a “translator” of it (Clay, 1983, p. 17).

One way to approach Epicurean philosophy is to question why Lucretius presents it through poetry. A key tenet in Epicureanism is the notion that philosophy—and, by extension, every mode of discourse—ought to serve the attainment of *ataraxia*. Hence, the truth of philosophy is not valuable of itself, but as a means to achieve the Epicurean end.<sup>2</sup> The same argument applies to poetry, which philosophers generally distrusted. During this time, the Greco-Romans perceived poetry

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<sup>1</sup> Epicurus wrote: “One must honor the noble, and the virtues and things like that, *if* they produce pleasure. But if they do not, one must bid them goodbye” (quoted by Athenaeus in Epicurus, 1994, p. 78).

<sup>2</sup> Epicurus wrote, “Empty is that philosopher's argument by which no human suffering is therapeutically treated. For just as there is no use in a medical art that does not cast out the sickness of bodies, so too there is no use in philosophy unless it casts out the suffering of the soul” (quoted in Nussbaum, 1994, p. 102). As we will see, Epicurean philosophy is distinctive for the way it positions its philosophy as important within—and not separate from—a specific context that involves how one lives interpersonally.

as a threat compromising one's attainment of philosophical truths.<sup>3</sup> Yet Lucretius chose the medium of poetry for a reason: by using melodic verse Lucretius knew it would be easier to attract those who are averse to hearing harsh philosophical truths. In this regard, Epicureans likened their philosophy to the discipline of medicine, analogizing the philosopher to a surgeon who must anesthetize his or her patient prior to the discomfort of treatment.<sup>4</sup> According to Epicurus, we have developed such insatiable appetites that we have strayed from pursuing the true form of pleasure. That is, we are confused in taking something as pleasurable when, in fact, it is harmful to our mental health. What's worse, when we look around us, we find that everyone else appears to desire the same harmful things. Thus, Epicurean philosophy is at odds with conventional living. This made their philosophy difficult for individuals to accept fully. It is difficult to question the values around which our lives are organized, making the Epicurean goal all the more challenging to achieve.

To address this challenge, Epicureans devised a three-step treatment plan to achieve *ataraxia*.<sup>5</sup> Yet despite their generalized claim that psychic conflict stems from mistaken beliefs about pleasure, the Epicureans approach is remarkably individualized, addressing the specific ways each person developed his or her understanding of pleasure. We witness this in Lucretius' attempt to appeal to readers through poetry, as well as Epicurus' belief that the gods' omniscience does not have much to do with human experience. The Epicureans deprioritized abstract theory in favor of concrete arguments that pertain to life as it is individually experienced. In this vein, one must remember that the subsequent review of Epicureanism is tailored to fit each individual.

The Epicurean argument begins by holding that, because most conventional pleasures lead to qualitatively greater forms of unrest, they must be averted. And so, the first task of the Epicurean is to distinguish between

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Plato's (1992) polemical attack in *The Republic*.

<sup>4</sup> Lucretius (2007) writes: "Nor is my method to no purpose—doctors do as much; consider a physician with a child who will not sip a disgusting dose of wormwood: first, he coats the goblet's lip all round with honey's sweet blond stickiness, that way to lure gullible though to taste it, and to drain the bitter cure, the child's duped but not cheated—rather, put back in the pink—that's what I do. Since those who've never tasted of it think this philosophy's a bitter pill to swallow, and the throng recoils, I wished to coat this physic in mellifluous song" (p. 30).

<sup>5</sup> In this regard, Nussbaum (1994) likens the Epicurean approach to an early form of psychotherapy.

limitless and self-contained pleasure. Disciples are led to see that many of the things we think are pleasurable are actually cause for despair. This originates from the nature of our desires. Most often, our desires are limitless, and no amount of gratification is sufficient to end our hunger for more. An example is the desire for power. As a politician (or any other individual who continually wants more) rises to power, Epicureans would argue that no status will be enough to quell this thirst, therefore desire for more leads to quantitatively greater insatiability and agony in an endless pursuit. In comparison, Epicureans identify self-contained desires capable of complete satisfaction. Equanimity is one example. No additional amount of equanimity will make life more valuable. Epicureans argue that the resulting form of pleasure is self-contained and, unlike desires for things like power, is actually pleasurable. In this argument, Epicureans introduce a qualitative dimension to their quantitative definition of pleasure: not only is pleasure defined by (quantitative) freedom from disturbance of the soul, its fulfillment is possible only by recognizing a (qualitative) distinction between limitless and self-contained desires.

After Epicureans distinguish between healthy and unhealthy desires, the second step is to find an explanation for how the latter desires originate. By this stage, the Epicurean disciple will have already gained awareness that some forms of pleasure are, in fact, not pleasurable at all. Now begins a process of self-reflection where disciples are led to discover that the source of their harmful desires arises from false belief.

According to Epicurus, false beliefs stand against our nature as human beings. The Epicurean philosopher will engage disciples through reason to reveal that limitless desires are not constitutive of human nature whereas those leading to *ataraxia* are. Let's reconsider the limitless craving for power. The Epicurean argues that people crave power not because it is inherent in being human, but because they are afraid of their humanity. The desire for power arises as a defense, protecting individuals from feelings of insecurity. What is the nature of insecurity? Epicureans believe that no matter how different each individual is, every person is fraught with the fear of his or her mortality.

The dread of death is so pervasive that Lucretius makes it central to his poem. He writes: "the task that follows for me here in my verses to explain and make the nature clear . . . and toss that Dread of Death out on its ear, since that's what stirs the lives of mortals into such turmoil from the very depths, and there is nothing that it does not soil" (2007,

p. 73). The Epicurean argument against death consists of three sub-arguments, each intending to prove that death should not trouble us. The most convincing is known as the “symmetry argument,” which claims that—just as existence prior to birth means nothing to us—we should not be concerned about what occurs after. For the Epicureans, however innocuous death is, we often live in attempt to divert our anxiety about it. Take for example the experience of romantic love. Lucretius (2007) shows that too often individuals idealize their lovers due to a complex fear of death: we idealize our lovers as immortal gods with the intention of ultimately possessing them so that, by association, we may achieve immortality (pp. 138–143). Romantic love, war, greed, revenge, and any other limitless forms of desire arise as a means of avoiding the reality of our transience. And no matter how much a follower denies fearing death, it is the task of the Epicurean philosopher to reveal how pervasive it is.<sup>6</sup>

However convincing this argument may (or may not) seem today, we should emphasize Epicurus’ prescient account of the human psyche. Epicurus discovered that people feel and behave in certain ways in order to divert themselves from something far more unsettling. This prototype of defense mechanisms was a novel way to understand human life. Through this depiction, Epicureans were able to argue that many forms of life serve as ways to psychically ward off threatening realities. As a consequence, behaviors like greed and aggression are symptoms of an underlying reality we choose not to confront.<sup>7</sup>

Because desires lie deep within the human mind, Epicurean practice goes further than merely providing an etiology of harmful desires. No matter how much a person tries to live by Epicurean teachings, it is likely that mistakes will be made and old habits will return. Hence, the third step: Epicureans claim that followers must repeatedly experience and live their philosophy. To this end, Epicurean disciples are taught

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<sup>6</sup> This is perhaps best articulated by Montaigne (1575/1987) who, in one of his essays, argues, “To philosophize is to learn how to die.” Heavily influenced by Lucretius, Montaigne observes that the true nature of an individual surfaces at the moment of his death. He says that, instead of wearing “masks,” we ought to live more truthfully with mortality (pp. 89–108).

<sup>7</sup> Martha Nussbaum (1994) develops this argument further by claiming that Epicurus was the first to “discover” the unconscious (p. 132). It is unlikely that Epicurus would have adopted the radical implications of the Freudian theory, yet evidence suggests that he predicts it in certain ways. Nussbaum rightly observes that Epicurus was aware that false beliefs (and desires) do not lie on the surface, but penetrate something much deeper within an individual’s psychological stance in the world.



to repeat and memorize philosophical truths. Yet because these disciples recognize that its truths are empty unless lived in reality, Epicureans argue that their philosophy ultimately concerns how it is lived interpersonally. Epicurus (1994) wrote, "The noble man is most involved with wisdom and friendship, of which [the former] is a mortal good, the [latter] immortal" (p. 40). Although Epicureans knew that they could not become gods, their unique position between animals and deities engendered a human dilemma: each individual could either strive to be like the gods or to succumb to a bestial life. Epicurean philosophy is centered on promoting the former, and encouraged disciples to become *like* gods despite knowledge that it was not fully possible.

This interpersonal model is important for a number of reasons. First, it signifies that the Epicureans maintained a relational stance to their approach that is compatible with a quantitative model of pleasure. The Epicurean appreciation of friendship repositions their quantitative definition of pleasure within an interpersonal schema. As a form of tension reduction, *ataraxia* is not an end in itself, but an end situated with another. Pleasure is still the quantitative reduction of "unpleasure," yet it can only be assessed within the interpersonal realm. This elevates friendship to a higher plane than wisdom, showing that no amount of theoretical knowledge outweighs interpersonal experience.<sup>8</sup> Such a concept includes the Epicurean argument against fearing death, suggesting that wisdom alone is insufficient to achieve the aims of Epicurean philosophy; the entire edifice of one's wisdom amounts to very little if it is not interpersonally situated. The import of relationships in Epicurean thought also illuminates life in "the Garden": one's friendship with peers and teachers is more important than devotion to an omniscient and unchallengeable leader. In this light, Epicureans advocated a shift from uncritically accepting metaphysical truths to reclaiming the centrality of interpersonal experience.

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<sup>8</sup> Of course, friendships are made for different purposes and motivations. The Epicureans would argue that relationships motivated by insecurity or other secondary gains are not self-contained and would actually lead to more psychic discord. Epicurus wrote, "Every friendship is worth choosing for its own sake, though it takes its origin from the benefits it confers on us" (1994, p. 37). Implicit in the Epicurean stance on friendship is that a relationship may be an end in itself.

### Epicureanism and Psychoanalytic Tradition

The prioritization of friendship in Epicurean philosophy is congruent with the relational turn in psychoanalysis. Selfhood and psychopathology do not exist “inside” one’s mind, but rather are woven from the fabric of one’s interpersonal environment (Sullivan, 1953). And so for Epicurus, the role of a philosopher is not merely to instruct, but to provide a hospitable space where a disciple may feel safe and a relationship may flourish (Greenberg, 1986). The traditional epistemological view about authority and objective knowledge is displaced in favor of knowledge that is interpersonally situated and verified, as in an analysis (Orange, 2011). Finally, because relationships are the impetus of psychological change, treatment must be individualized (Buechler, 2012). Yet although Epicurean philosophy is congruent with many tenets in relational theory, it also directly pertains to Freud and his theory of pleasure. In the subsequent sections, I argue that classical psychoanalytic theory is situated within the Epicurean tradition, despite Freud’s failure to fully recognize it. More immediately, I argue for the relevance of this analysis by tracing the controversial history of Freud’s philosophical debts.

To my knowledge, Jacques Derrida is the only major scholar to begin asking questions about the Epicurean influence in Freud’s work. In his essay “My Chances,” Derrida (1984) explores the Epicurean notion of *parenklisis*, the theory that all elements of the universe are subject to indeterminacy, or chance. He wonders how the type of indeterminacy fundamental to Epicurean philosophy is actually pervasive in Freudian psychoanalysis, even though it purports to be a science of predictable psychophysical forces and laws. The question is valuable in itself, but—for the purposes of this article—Derrida also analyzes an illuminating passage by Freud. Derrida turns to Freud’s early 1901 paper (“The Psychopathology of Everyday Life”) where Freud anecdotally describes an instance of forgetting the name Gassendi, the 17th-century scholar famous for reintroducing Epicureanism as an acceptable scientific and religious theory. Freud (1901/1966) analyzes his own experience as follows:

Here is an example of name-forgetting with yet another and very subtle motivation which its subject has explained himself: When I was examined in philosophy as a subsidiary subject I was questioned by the examiner about the teachings of Epicurus, and after that I was asked if I knew who had taken up his theories in later centuries. I answered with the

name of Pierre Gassendi, whom I had heard described as a disciple of Epicurus while I was sitting in a cafe only a couple of days before. To the surprised question how I knew that, I boldly answered that I had long been interested in Gassendi. The result of this was a certificate *magna cum laude*, but also unfortunately a subsequent obstinate tendency to forget the name Gassendi. My guilty conscience is, I think, to blame for my inability to remember the name in spite of all efforts; for I really ought not to have known it on that occasion either. (p. 42)

Freud writes that he persistently forgets Gassendi's name because he is plagued by guilt of having lied about a longstanding interest in Gassendi during his university examinations.<sup>9</sup> Perhaps Freud's guilt about not actually studying Epicureanism causes him to forget about the philosophy altogether. Or, more accurately, Freud forgets the disciple of Epicureanism just as he himself stands as a disciple. In his distinctive style, Derrida (1984) writes, "one could say that Freud simultaneously identifies and transfers a symptom that could be called: the disciple of Epicurus and the forgetting of his name" (p. 18).

Derrida suggests that the theory of psychoanalysis can be seen as a symptom of forgetting the influence of Epicureanism. As many know, much scholarship has been devoted to Freud's tendency to "forget" the sources of his theories. Freud (1920/1950) himself refers to what he calls "cryptamnesia," the tendency to forget the origins of his theory. He writes that he was never certain whether he developed the dual-instinct theory coincidentally with Empedocles, or whether it was directly influenced by the ancient philosopher (Freud, 1937/1963a, pp. 244–245). Although Freud playfully discusses cryptamnesia, scholars like Todd Dufresne (2000) contend that these transgressions are more serious for the ways that Freud avoids crediting writers like Adler and Stekel. After all, it was Wilhelm Stekel, a member in the psychoanalytic circle, who first used the word "Thanatos" to signify the notion of a death wish in 1909, over a decade prior to Freud's use of it. However, Freud does mention Sabina Spielrein. In a footnote in *BPP*, Freud (1920/2011)

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<sup>9</sup> We have more reason to believe that Freud was at least relatively aware of his debt to Epicureanism. In addition to his statements quoted here, we now know that around the time he wrote *BPP*, he was reading the works of Epicurean-inspired French essayist, Michel de Montaigne (Reidel-Schrewe, 1994, pp. 1–2). Montaigne's *Essays* contain nearly a hundred direct quotations from Epicurean texts, and it is possible that Freud was inspired by this introduction to Epicurean philosophy.

writes that Spielrein “anticipated a significant part of this speculation” about the death drive, yet simultaneously says that her article is “unfortunately not fully clear to me” (p. 91). Freud was referring to Spielrein’s (1910/1994) work, “Destruction as the Cause of Coming into Being,” where she describes a primal destructive instinct in organic life that acts contrary to the pleasure principle. Though these theories are similar, scholars disagree about how influential Spielrein actually was. In personal correspondences, Freud wrote that he did not agree with Spielrein and viewed her theory as lacking empirical validity. Dufresne (2000) argues that Freud chose to mention her work “to put his followers off the scent of his true debts” (p. 22). “This tactic is characteristic of Freud,” Dufresne writes, “who could give with one hand while he took with the other” (p. 21).

We might say that Freud avoids credit to other philosophers because he was so ambivalent about philosophy itself. In part this is due to Freud’s belief that philosophy would threaten the scientific grounds of psychoanalysis. In his “Autobiographical Study” Freud (1935/1963b) writes:

I have on the contrary always remained in the closest touch with the analytic material and have never ceased working at detailed points of clinical or technical importance. Even when I have moved away from observation, I have carefully avoided any contact with philosophy proper . . . . The large extent to which psychoanalysis coincides with the philosophy of Schopenhauer . . . is not to be traced to my acquaintance with his teaching. I read Schopenhauer very late in my life. (p. 59)

Yet for all his efforts to gain distance from philosophy, *BPP* is his most philosophical work. Derrida’s (1980/1987) careful reading of the text shows how Freud’s philosophical debts return to haunt him. According to this reading, Freud’s book is ultimately a way for him to engage with philosophy while simultaneously maintaining his distance. Derrida is concerned to show how Freud’s “speculation” about the death drive opens another possibility, antithetical to the pleasure principle that dominated psychoanalytic theory. Though Derrida writes in light of his deconstructionist agenda, it is a fascinating and delicate study of Freud’s tense relationship with philosophy.

More recently, Alfred Tauber (2010) describes Freud as a “frustrated philosopher.” Although Freud was well-versed in philosophical texts, he simultaneously argued that philosophy was a speculative exercise that

contributed little to scientifically grounding psychoanalysis. Freud's ambivalence towards philosophy is readily apparent in his writings. For example, in a well-known passage of *BPP*, Freud (1920/2011) turns to the philosophy of Plato only to disparage his name as a "poet-philosopher," as one who does not validate or contribute to the objective demands of empirical science (p. 95). There are also times where Freud turns to philosophers only to situate them within his own psychoanalytic turf. For example, in "The Economic Problem of Masochism," the moment after Freud discusses Kant's categorical imperative as the apogee of morality, he situates the theory within a psychoanalytic framework by claiming it is "the direct heir of the Oedipus complex" (1924/1963c, p. 167). This is classic throughout Freud's later works, all which appear to engage with philosophy while maintaining a psychoanalytic-"scientific" foothold. Hence, despite Freud's familiarity with the philosophical tradition, he rarely acknowledged his debts. This no doubt involves Freud's relationship with Epicurean thought, and raises questions about how psychoanalysis might have benefited had Freud acknowledged its influence.

### Freud and Fechner: The Return of a Quantitative Theory on Pleasure

One exception to Freud's philosophical ambivalence concerns his relationship with Fechner. Gustav Theodor Fechner, the 19th-century mystical philosopher and founder of experimental psychology, is cited both very early in Freud's development of psychoanalysis in his 1895 *Project* and then in Freud's speculations during the 1920s. Among other things, Fechner is famous for his psychophysical theory that forces existing in the mind are subject to the laws of physics. Fechner postulated that the experiences of pleasure and "unpleasure" are rooted in psychophysical states of stability or instability. We experience pleasure precisely because forces in the mind approximate a state of equilibrium. Like the Epicureans, Fechner's pleasure principle is the maxim that all organic life is motivated to achieve pleasure by avoiding the instability associated with psychophysical unrest. Fechner argued that the laws of the mind are subject to the same laws of the physical universe, giving rise to his second postulation, the principle of constancy.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Henri Ellenberger helps elucidate the development of Fechner's theory (and links it to his nervous breakdown). According to Ellenberger (1993), Fechner appropriated his principle

Fechner's principles are the lynchpin of psychoanalytic theory as Freud conceived it. In *BPP*, where Freud explicitly aims to investigate the underlying assumptions of psychoanalysis, he cites Fechner with uncharacteristic detail. Freud (1920/2011) writes that Fechner's "deep vision" of pleasure "basically [coincides] with the one psychoanalytic work compels us to adopt" (p. 52). Freud believed that Fechner's definition of pleasure is the foundation of psychoanalysis and is so important that he investigates its implications through the rest of the book.

Although Dufresne (2011) calls *BPP* "the Rosetta Stone of Freudian theory" for the way he observes Freud's return to the very principle he had adopted in 1895 to ground psychoanalysis (p. 26), *BPP* is also noteworthy for the way Freud develops Fechner's principle beyond Fechner's original formulation. In addition to claiming that all organisms strive towards stability, Freud claimed that existence itself is inherently unstable. As a result, he said that the entirety of life is spent in search for an impossible psychophysical state. Freud claimed that life itself is an annoying disturbance that diverts an organism's ultimate drive towards stability. *BPP* concludes by speculating on the ultimate primordial drive, the death drive, which Freud said is the organism's desire to "die in its own way," and achieve the pleasure of complete imperturbability (1920/2011, p. 78).<sup>11</sup>

Freud thought he had discovered the logical consequence of Fechner's principle. The death drive is presupposed by the pleasure principle because death is the only state of absolute equilibrium. According to Freud's interpretation of Fechner, one can only fully achieve a state of psychic equilibrium through death. Epicureans show this simply is not true. Epicurean theory holds a very similar quantitative perspective on pleasure but does not draw the same conclusion. Although both Fechner

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of stability from Robert Mayer, who was the first to propose a principle of the conservation of energy. After Mayer, Herman von Helmholtz developed the principle further, applying it to the realm of psychology (pp. 95–96).

<sup>11</sup> Freud claimed that this struggle for primacy defines both drives, including the sex (or life) drive. When external stimuli threaten an organism with death, it seeks to protect itself so that it may achieve death on its own ground. It explains why we do not succumb to death the first chance an external threat presents itself. Between the drive to achieve death on our own, and the possibility of being robbed by this birthright, we are caught within "a wavering rhythm in the life of organisms," where "one group of drives [i.e., death] storms forward to reach the final goal of life as soon as possible, but the other group [i.e., life] shoots back to a certain location on the path to retrace it from a given point, thus prolonging the journey" (1920/2011, p. 79).

and Epicurus believed that true pleasure is the avoidance of psychophysical strife, the Epicureans developed a theory on how to cultivate a life devoted to true pleasure, without equating pleasure with death. How can these two similar theories draw two very different conclusions?

Fechnerian psychophysics are actually quite different from Epicurean ethics. For Epicureanism, *ataraxia* is a state that is sought and cultivated. This involves a type of philosophical *askesis*, the repudiation of socially conventional desire. As such, Epicureanism endorses an ethic, a way of life that one must develop. For Fechner, in contrast, pleasure is understood as a common psychophysical process. It works indiscriminately, whether we want it to or not. It might appear that the two traditions, although both centered on a quantitative definition of pleasure, are actually describing different phenomena and reaching different conclusions. But that simply overlooks the compatibility of the Epicurean state of *ataraxia* with Fechner's psychophysical universal theory. We might wonder whether there is, in fact, an alternative conclusion Freud might have drawn. As suggested by Derrida, Freud's symptom of forgetting the link to Epicurus has serious implications for psychoanalytic theory. Although articulating a quantitative perspective of pleasure, Freud's forgetfulness of Epicureanism ultimately amounts to neglecting to account for its qualitative features. To this end, I believe that Freud might have drawn other conclusions, instead of the death drive, and possibly a theory of the drives that is amenable to both qualitative and quantitative dimensions.

### Toward an Interpersonal Theory of Drive

Many recognize that Freud's bleak conclusion propelled psychoanalytic theory toward an even bleaker horizon (e.g., Brown, 1959/1985; Ricoeur, 1970; Dufresne, 2011). Freud himself acknowledges this when he writes that his theory has "unwittingly sailed into the harbor of Schopenhauer's philosophy" (1920/2011, p. 87). To reference Schopenhauer, the renowned philosophical pessimist, is to situate psychoanalysis in a similar context of hopelessness and to put pleasure in a compromised position. Freud conceived pleasure along individualistic lines, believing that his investigations proved that the drives ultimately lead to a longing for independence from others so that one may die pleasurably, that is, alone. Conceived in this way, the drives appear to leave no possibility for a satisfactory interpersonal life. This is one reason why drive theory is justifiably interpreted as representing a type of psychoanalytic despair. Yet

although this conclusion seems consistent enough with Freud's appropriation of Fechner, in what follows I suggest that this interpretation is misguided. Moreover, Freud's definition of the drives is actually more congruent with relational theory than has been previously argued.

Freud believed that the death drive was the logical consequence of the pleasure principle. This is what led Norman O. Brown to accuse Freud of promoting a dialectical stage of despair. Brown (1959/1985) writes, "The psychoanalytical practitioners have good reason to draw back from Freud's final instinct theory. The theory, as he left it, results in complete therapeutic pessimism, and is therefore worse than useless for therapists" (p. 81). Along with Paul Ricoeur (1970), who adopts a similar line of reasoning, Brown was one of the few theorists who took the death drive seriously enough to rescue it. Brown attempted to reconcile the death drive by claiming that it is not opposed to, but compatible with existence in the way that death substantiates life. For Brown, the greatest enemy of life is not death itself, but the denial of death. Through recognizing our drive towards death—that is, through confronting our mortality—Brown says that we are redeemed in life by ceasing to escape the grip of death. Thus, Brown (1959/1985) writes: "It is one of the sad ironies of contemporary intellectual life that Freud's hypothesis of an innate death instinct [*sic*], which has been received with horror as the acme of pessimism, actually offers the only way out of the really pessimistic hypothesis of an innate aggressive instinct" (p. 99). Along with Brown, but for different reasons, I suggest that drive theory does not conclude as bleakly as Freud originally believed.

Turning to Epicureanism reminds us that Freud's quantitative definition of pleasure does not entail that human existence must be lived alone. Far from it, the Epicureans were able to defend a quantitative understanding of pleasure while showing that the experience of it is only relevant within the interpersonal realm. The goal of *ataraxia* is congruent with Freud's pleasure principle and what he claimed is "beyond." Moreover, insofar as Fechner and Freud chose to appropriate one facet of Epicurean philosophy—the notion that all organisms strive to achieve the pleasure of quantitative psychic stability—does not mean that they can do without the Epicurean qualitative differentiation of two forms of desire. In fact, recognition of this important difference would have rescued Freud from rendering human existence in individualistic terms: the Epicurean impetus to qualitatively distinguish between two forms of pleasure is rooted in



the interpersonal realm. What we derive (and greatly benefit) from Epicurean philosophy is the notion of life-sustaining qualitative pleasure that is congruent with our drive towards the quantitative stability of pleasure.

Perhaps it is now appropriate to address an implicit argument concerning drive theory. Throughout this article, reference is made to Freud's use of the word "drive"—drive theory, the death drive, etc.—not the term "instinct." I have intentionally used this terminology because in *BPP* and other works, Freud used the term *Trieb*—not *Instinkt*—to refer to the ultimate nature of psychological life. In *BPP*, Freud provides a concise definition of the drives: "a drive is an urge inherent in living organic matter for the restoration of an earlier state" (1920/2011, pp. 76–77). As Holder (1992) points out, when the term *Instinkt* does appear in Freud's work, it always refers to animal processes.<sup>12</sup> Freud's designated translator Strachey is primarily responsible for the confusion between *Trieb* and *Instinkt*, as he chose the term "instinct" throughout the *Standard Edition*. Yet as Mills (2005) reminds us, Freud deliberately wrote about drives to emphasize the psyche's malleable, purposeful, transforming, and transformative goal-directed nature. Unlike instincts, drives are not fixed and repetitive processes. Rather, drives have a *telos*, a goal or purpose, and consist of psychic pressure for action that continually adapts to the surrounding world. Mills writes, "to speak of the destiny of a drive without other people becoming the object of its aims is a vacuous and ludicrous proposition, for a drive without an object is blind and empty" (p. 174).

Despite the ambiguity in Freud's own works, it is a mistake to equate drive theory with biological reduction. Drives represent life's goal-directed activity, engaging with the world to achieve psychophysical calm. Yet it is understandable to reductionistically interpret drive theory, given Freud's tendency to do the same. One example involves Freud's conclusion that the goal of all life is death, as if pleasure was merely situated in the individual realm. And although Freud explored this issue theoretically, it is unlikely that he maintained it in clinical practice and recognized that human beings ultimately strive for human contact and

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<sup>12</sup> This is one reason why Richter's recent translation of *BPP* is preferable to earlier editions. Richter also translates with more fidelity to Freud's accessible writing style, rendering the text closer to the original. Nevertheless, Richter maintains that a biological reading of Freud's *Trieb* is still appropriate because he uses this term to refer to all organic life.

acceptance (a psychological fact that attachment theorists later emphasized). Moreover, other areas in Freud's writing suggest that he understood that drives have a *telos* whose force is to seek human contact. Mills reviews key instances where the drives are discussed by Freud to remind us that drives imply the presence and importance of otherness in our individual lives. For example, Freud (1921/1955) writes: "Rarely . . . is individual psychology in a position to disregard relations of this individual to others. In the individual's mental life someone is invariably involved. . . so from the very first individual psychology. . . is at the same time social psychology" (p. 69).

*BPP* can be seen as representing Freud's intellectual struggle with drive theory, rather than the elaboration of a definitive statement on the death drive, on *Eros*, and on the psyche. Despite his hypothesis that the goal of life is death, in this period of Freud's writings we also witness an appreciation for the relationally directed basis of psychological life. This is necessary to make sense of Freud's theory on *Eros* (which first appears in *BPP* and gains additional prominence in later works). Towards the end of *BPP*, Freud is evidently unsatisfied with his conclusions on the death drive. Freud introduces *Eros* as a theoretical development that is in contrast to the death drive.<sup>13</sup> Derivative of Freud's earlier formulations of the sex drive, *Eros* does not merely aim towards reproduction, but more generally seeks unification with the exterior world. It is likely that Freud developed this line of his thought because he was not fully convinced that all of life is ultimately explained by the death drive. Freud likely knew that people are motivated to connect and gain acceptance with community, rather than merely seek the individual tranquility of death.<sup>14</sup> Yet because of Freud's determination to investigate the logical conclusions of the pleasure principle, he found it difficult to justify *Eros*. It is surprising that Freud turned to Plato and the mystical tradition represented by Aristophanes in the *Symposium*, where *Eros* is described as a yearning for

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<sup>13</sup> The term *Thanatos* does not appear in *BPP*, or anywhere else in Freud's published texts. Dufresne (2011) believes that Freud's refusal to include this term originates from his battle with Stekel, who described *Thanatos* in 1909.

<sup>14</sup> For example, Freud concludes *Civilization and Its Discontents*, written 10 years after *BPP*, saying, "the inclination to aggression is an original self-subsisting instinctual disposition in man, and I return to my view that it constitutes the greatest impediment to civilization. . . . I may now add that civilization is a process in the service of *Eros*, whose purpose is to combine single human beings, and after that families, then races, peoples and nations, into one great unity, the unity of mankind" (1930/2005, p. 69).

interpersonal reunification. We might wonder why Freud made this appeal, given his ambivalence towards philosophy. Most likely, Freud was not content with the implications of the death drive, and was unable to theoretically account for the life-affirming features of the psyche. Yet as the study of Epicureanism reveals, relationally constituted features of the psyche are presupposed within the very structure of Freud's definition of the pleasure principle, despite Freud's failure to appreciate it.

### Conclusion

Freud concludes *BPP* stating, "The pleasure principle seems to serve the death drive directly" (1920/2011, p. 99). This article challenges such a conclusion. Although the drive towards psychophysical stability may be constitutive of mental life, mental life concerns the manner by which humans interpersonally relate. The notion of *ataraxia* demonstrates that the pursuit of relational (and life affirmative) pleasure is possible, and is congruent with Freud's depiction of the death drive. There is a difference between a drive towards stability and a drive towards death, and it is suggested here that Freud is only committed to the former.

In fact, Freud's reasoning to postulate the death drive—how it has been generally confused with the drive towards stability—conflates an important distinction. In a highly discussed passage from *BPP*, Freud writes: "We recognized a striving—as expressed in the pleasure principle—to reduce, keep constant, or eliminate internal tension due to stimuli as the dominant tendency of mental life and perhaps life in general (the nirvana principle, as Barbara Low calls it), and this recognition is one of our strongest reasons for believing in the existence of death drives" (1920/2011, p. 92). Yet the "nirvana principle" is actually quite different from what I will call the "principle of death." The nirvana principle is the notion that organisms strive to maintain a level of psychophysical tension as low as possible (not inexistent), and thus brings us back to the Epicurean notion of pleasure. Compare this to the principle of death that states that organisms reach for an *absolute* discharge of energy. Put differently: the nirvana principle maintains at least *some* level of energy, just so long as it is constant, whereas the principle of death strives for a state of no psychic energy whatsoever. This is a distinction Ricoeur (1970) makes between two concepts: inertia and constancy. The nirvana principle operates under constancy: Pleasure is experienced as a release of psychic tension, presupposing the idea that there will always

be psychic energy. The death principle operates according to laws of inertia. It is the exact opposite: There is no pleasure because there is no tension to be released. Freud conflates and confuses this distinction. He mistakes Fechner's pleasure principle as leading organisms toward a state of inertia, when the logic of his reasoning actually just commits him to a principle of constancy.<sup>15</sup> This distinction is crucial for psychoanalytic theory (and practice), especially if drive theory can remain the psychoanalytic philosophical groundwork, as Freud intended.

This is also where Epicurean philosophy illuminates Freud's confusion or ambivalence. In fact, later in his career, and like the Epicureans, Freud (1923/1960) argued that fearing death promotes a type of worry that can only be resolved once one reaches death.<sup>16</sup> This argument can only make sense if, contrary to Freud's use of Fechner's perspective of the death drive as aiming towards inertia, pleasure is seen for what it represents psychically—namely, psychophysical equilibrium. As found in the Epicurean tradition, this does not involve the negation of pleasure, nor death, nor does this lead to a world of denial or subsequent psychic conflict. Quite the contrary, it promotes what Nussbaum calls “a world more richly human” and appreciation for the inextricable social fabric of human life. Nussbaum (1994) writes that the Epicureans “do this by exposing myths and delusions that constrain us and prevent us from dealing with one another in a fully human way. They teach us to acknowledge one another, and ourselves, as human beings” (p. 144). The Epicureans remind us that any quantitative theory of pleasure presupposes the way

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<sup>15</sup> That Freud does this is further shown through how he *induces* the death drive from the nirvana principle. The state of nirvana envisioned by Fechner's constancy principle is not the death drive itself, but an expression of a hypothetical construct. Freud makes this clear when he cites the nirvana principle as “evidence” for the death drive. In other words, he never observes the death drive itself—he does not see organisms actually striving towards death.

<sup>16</sup> Many have interpreted Freud's death drive as a meditation on the meaning death confers onto life. Norman Brown and Paul Ricoeur claimed that the death instinct requires us to think about an alternative to the suffering of our lives. Ludwig Binswanger (1975) wrote about man's “truthfulness” in recognizing his mortal fate, and said that life only has meaning so long as one recognizes death (p. 151). However dominant this line of interpreting Freud has been, we should remember that Freud actually dismisses it. In *The Ego and the Id*, written three years after *BPP*, Freud writes that the fear of death “has hardly any meaning, and at any rate cannot be justified” (1923/1960, p. 60). Like the way Epicureans caution disciples against fearing death, Freud situates death as emanating from castration anxiety. According to Freud, fear of death is a neurotic position that has nothing to do with the impending reality of nonexistence.

pleasure is experienced interpersonally. In the end, most would likely agree that this is the impetus of any therapeutic relationship.

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