THE TROUBLE WITH PTOLEMY – RECONSIDERING JEAN LAPLANCHE'S CRITIQUE OF THE DEATH DRIVE

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For to evade the death drive in his [Freud's] doctrine is not to know his doctrine at all
Lacan (2006) [1966]: 679[1]

Introduction

The publication of *Vocabulaire de Laplanche* (Tessier 2024) is a most recent tribute to Jean Laplanche [1924-2012] as one of the most fascinating French psychoanalysts. Besides the fact that numerous of his publications have been translated over the years, Laplanche's *The Language of Psychoanalysis* (1967) (*Vocabulaire de la psychanalyse*), co-authored with Jean-Bertrand Pontalis [1924-2013], is without a doubt one of his most renown publications, published in twenty-two languages, including the English language. Nonetheless, it is his ultimate publication, an introduction (from 2010) to Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920), that serves as the genuine impetus for this contribution, shedding a light on its major significance for both Freud and Laplanche.

From *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920) onwards, Freud remained committed to a concept that already had a lengthy conceptual history[2] prior to its development into a genuine element of Freudian metapsychology, namely the death drive. None of Freud's concepts have ever provoked considerable controversy. Well-known proponents of it include Melanie Klein, Jacques Lacan, and André Green, while Donald Winnicott is renowned for his desire to purify psychoanalysis from the death drive due to its lack of any added value for psychoanalytic theory and practice. In a similar vein, Jean Laplanche is a prominent critic within the field of French psychoanalysis. With the motto 'putting Freud to work' (*faire travailler Freud*), Laplanche's life was entirely dedicated to the methodological advancement of the Freudian project, in addition to his pivotal role in the immense task of translating Freud into French. Laplanche proposes a radically critical approach to Freud, or "reading with Freud", wherein Freud's own writings are subjected to the psychoanalytic method, as opposed to the hermeneutic approach (Laplanche 2006 [1968]). His aim is not to establish the 'true meaning' of Freud's texts, but to remain true to Freud's method by deploying it against Freud himself and thus putting Freud's invention back to work again. This approach leads to a thoroughly thinking-through of the Freudian 'Copernican revolution'[3] with the 'General

[1] Contrary to Strachey's Standard Edition of Freud's texts and in line with Laplanche, the German term *Trieb* (French: *pulsion*) is translated as 'drive' and not as 'instinct' (*Instinkt*) throughout this article. This choice is also in line with the Revised Standard Edition, prepared by Mark Solms on behalf of the Institute of Psychoanalysis, London.

[2] For a short conceptual history of the death drive: see De Vleminck (2016). For a recent study on *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*: see Westerink, Willner and Van Haute (2024).

[33] With the 'Copernican revolution', Laplanche refers to the final of the so-called three 'blows' of humanity. According to Freud, after Copernicus ("our earth was not the centre of the universe") and Darwin ('man's […] descent from the animal kingdom'), psychoanalysis implies the 'most wounding blow' by showing that 'the ego […] is not even master in its own house' (Freud SE XVI 1963 [1916-1917]: 284-285). For Laplanche, Copernicus, whom Freud associates with 'the destruction of this narcissistic illusion' (Freud 1917:

Theory of Seduction' as Laplanche's Rosetta Stone.[4] Laplanche's decentring of the human subject results in his new foundations for psychoanalysis in terms of the 'fundamental anthropological situation' (*la situation anthropologique fondamentale*).

This contribution raises questions regarding of the function and significance of the death drive in Laplanche's re-founding of Freudian thought. A reconstruction of the vicissitudes of the death drive in Laplanche's work indeed reveals his incisive critique of Freud's notion. I contend that Laplanche's radical development of Freud's Copernican revolution through a re-founding of the Freudian project in the 'General Theory of Seduction' may result in a somewhat distorted interpretation of the death drive concept. In this sense, the death drive can be interpreted as being an enigmatic signifier for the Laplanchean project. In what follows, I will argue against Laplanche's critique of Freud's death drive. But with Laplanche, however, I will make the case for a different critical re-reading of Freud, also aiming to 'putting Freud to work', as Laplanche would say. Scrutinizing Laplanche's critique of Freud's death drive through a very peculiar Freudian lens, I want to problematize Freud's death drive from a different methodological perspective, that is, by re-contextualizing it in the research matrix of melancholia. It is argued that re-contextualizing the death drive within the clinical context of melancholia will contribute to the clarification of this specific notion and illuminate its clinical significance. Hence, instead of Laplanche's meta-psychological exigency (*Zwang, exigence*), it is the clinic of melancholia that serves as the benchmark for the death drive's relevance. This implies that Laplanche is confronted with the reemergence of Ptolemy, the representative of subject-centrism, as an inedible remainder of the Copernican-Freudian project.[5]

The Vicissitudes of the death drive in Laplanche

It is important to clarify that the death drive was not Laplanche main point of interest. It has not been the primary topic of any of his numerous university lecture courses (1970-1992), which were published in the seven volumes of *Problématiques* (1980-2006), nor has it been addressed or studied in the critical reception of Laplanche's work.[6] Although the death drive was not Laplanche's primary concern, a closer look at his work reveals that, nevertheless, the theme runs like a read thread throughout his work. Furthermore, it appears that Laplanche is struggling with the concept, trying to relate to this 'unwelcome Freudian child'. From the monumental *The Language of Psychoanalysis* (1967) onwards, pointing to the death drive as 'one of the most controversial of psycho-analytic concepts' (1967: 97), until his presumably final text, the 2010-preface to the French edition of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920), Laplanche attempts to grasp the death drive as some sort of 'error' (1997: 49) or an

140), symbolizes the decentring of the subject. Laplanche aspires to think through the Freudian project. Correspondingly he defines it in terms of an 'unfinished Copernican revolution' (*la révolution copernicienne inachevée*) (Laplanche 1992).

[4] In line with Scarfone (2015: xiii), we consistently opt for the translation 'General Theory of Seduction' (instead of 'theory of generalized seduction') in order to oppose it to Freud's theory of seduction as a 'specific theory of seduction'.

[5] While Freud himself does not refer to Ptolemy, he is introduced by Laplanche as the counterpart of Copernicus, who abandoned Ptolemaic *auto*- or *ipso*-centrism (by analogy with egocentrism) in favour of an *allo*-centrism (by analogy with heliocentrism). Laplanche reads Freud's work as a project of the Copernican revolution that needs to be purified from the last 'Ptolemaic elements' – this is Freud's biologism – in favour of the primacy of the other.

[6] Besides for Scarfone's introduction to Laplanche, where hardly four pages are devoted to this issue (Scarfone 1997; 2015), the articles of Bell (2004) and Ribas (2015) are exceptions to the rule. Correspondingly, the introductory volumes by Tessier (2014; 2024) and Ashtor (2022) do not or barely elaborate the theme of the death drive.

'enigmatic signifier', qualified as a 'so-called' concept that might better be 'chucked out' (*jeté*) (1999 [1997]: 50).

In *The Language of Psychoanalysis*, Laplanche still remains ambiguous about the status of 'this speculative hypothesis' 'postulated' by Freud (1967: 97). '[E]ven though it is possible to recognize the death drive as a new guise for a basic and constant sine qua non of Freudian thought', Laplanche and Pontalis argue, 'it must be emphasized that its introduction does embody a new conceptual departure' (1967: 103). Besides explicitly addressing the death drive for the first time, *The Language of Psychoanalysis* is equally informative for Laplanche's expanding on the Freudian concept of leaning-on (*Anlehnung, étayage*), introduced by Freud in *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1905). In a certain sense, the further elaboration and centralization of leaning-on is the primary focus of *Life and Death in Psychoanalysis* (1970), where it functions as the delineating notion between what Laplanche refers to as the 'vital order' (the biological) and the so-called drive-related 'sexual order' (the psychical). According to Laplanche, the domain of psychoanalysis is defined by the latter order, which implies the possibility of human psychopathology and thus determines the anthropological difference. The corresponding disqualification of the biological register, which can be witnessed here already, is recalibrated later on when Laplanche rethinks Freud's 'specific theory of seduction' into a 'General Theory of Seduction' (1970: 24). Remaining all too biologistic, the Ptolemaic auto-centrism of leaning-on is replaced by the Copernican allo-centrism of the original seduction by the other. In other words, the genesis of the psychic and of sexuality is more specifically situated in 'the implantation of enigmatic messages from the other'. Laplanche will argue that 'the theory of seduction is even more important than that of leaning-on or, if you will, it [the General Theory of Seduction] is the one that articulates the truth of the notion of leaning-on' (1980: 69; my translation). According to Laplanche, the original seduction by the other defines 'the essentially traumatic nature of human sexuality' (1970: 84).

Against this backdrop, Laplanche's *Life and Death in Psychoanalysis* moves through the Freudian corpus, from *Three Essays* (1905) to 'On Narcissism' (1914), pointing to narcissism as one of Freud's most important discoveries. For Laplanche, 'the nodal point of "narcissism"' implies 'an apparently unforeseeable mutation of metapsychology: that brought about by the "death drive"' (1970: 84). Therefore, instead of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Laplanche identifies the emergence of narcissism as the genuine great 'turning point' in Freud's thinking. He argues that the implications of the conflation and unification of the drive related sexual libido, on the one hand, and the narcissistic libido, on the other hand, 'compelled' Freud – in terms of 'exigency' (*Zwang, exigence*) – to oppose the death drive to Eros, identifying the latter as 'the bound and binding form of sexuality, brought to light by the discovery of narcissism' (1970: 123). Hence, according to Laplanche, Freud's introduction of the death drive cannot be deemed a novel discovery. In fact, it only implies a re-discovery and re-introduction of the demonic aspect of sexuality, that is, which was obscured by the great turning point of narcissism. Laplanche employs the term 'compulsion' to emphasize 'the structural necessity […] to reaffirm […] a kind of antilife of sexuality, frenic enjoyment [*jouissance*], the negative' – pointing at 'aggression, destruction, sadomasochism, hatred, etc.' (1970: 107) – [and] 'the repetition compulsion' (1970: 124). According to Laplanche, the death drive is a genuine paradox: it is 'not an element in conflict, but a *conflict itself* substantialized, an internal principle of strife and disunion' (1970: 122). Despite his confession that 'the genealogy of the final *dualism* [of the drives]' is considered a 'riddle we […] are beginning to decipher', Laplanche already paves a way out

of the deadlock by arguing that 'the death drive does not possess its own energy. Its energy is libido. Or, better put, the death drive is the very soul, the constitutive principle, of libidinal circulation' (1970: 124).

Reconsidering the issue of the death drive in *Problématiques IV* (university lecture series 1977-79), Laplanche further elaborates these ideas by redefining the introduction of narcissism as 'indeed a discovery', 'an absolutely new exploration'. According to Laplanche, the introduction of narcissism is 'necessary to reaffirm something essential in sexuality which has been lost', that is, 'non-connected sexuality, sexuality that could be described as "unbound" in the sense of the drive' (Laplanche 1981: 190-91). Consequently, he confidently asserts that 'in my view, […] the death drive itself is not something absolutely new, an un-heard of discovery, but it is itself a deepening of sexuality in its most radical aspect' (Laplanche 1981: 188). Comprehending the death drive in terms of 'a deepening [*approfondissement*] and re-working' of the very domain of sexuality, Laplanche continues: 'Here, then, is the extreme form of the thesis', he argues, 'the death drive has been misunderstood, repressed, until its discovery' (1981: 189). On the one hand, Laplanche makes clear that Freud's death drive must be dealt with, on the other hand he finds it 'remarkable that the death drive was never made into a shibboleth' (Laplanche 1981: 193). In fact, Laplanche puts his cards on the table at the very end of his lecture series. For the first time, Laplanche explicitly discusses the 'sexual death drives', raising the rhetorical question: 'But how can we define the sexual death drive?' (1981: 222). The obvious response corresponds to the title of his 1984-lecture, 'The death drive in the general theory of the sexual drive'. Despite their 'fundamental dissymmetry", both the life and death drives are considered 'on the basis of a common libidinal energy' (1986 [1984]: 24; my translation) and qualified as 'the banners […] of forces whose only field of activity is the human psyche, or more precisely, its sexual psyche' (1991: 213).

It is imperative to situate Laplanche's notion of the sexual death drive against the backdrop of the recalibration and radicalization of his theory. Ten years after *Life and Death in Psychoanalysis* (1970), the series *Problématiques* (1980-2006) reveals a re-founding of his thinking with its most explicit re-articulation in *New Foundations for Psychoanalysis* (1987). His 'General Theory of Seduction' evolves to become the intellectual kernel of Laplanche's new foundations for Freudian thought. According to Freud, the infantile sexual pleasure experience initially accompanies the satisfaction of the primary drives (by the caregivers), by 'leaning-on' them. Subsequently, the erogenous zones begin to pursue autonomous pleasure experiences. For Freud, the so-called autoeroticism is the original condition of infantile sexuality *stricto sensu* (Freud 2017 [1905]: 42-43). In Laplanche's interpretation of Freud, however, the initiator of infantile sexuality is the other, the adult caregiver, who, while satisfying the infant's needs, simultaneously seduces the infant with enigmatic sexual messages. According to Laplanche, the seduction of the child by the adult is inevitable and refers to what he calls the 'fundamental anthropological situation'. Consequently, we can understand Laplanche's statement that this generalized seduction 'expresses the truth of the notion of leaning-on' (1980: 69; my translation). However, an important implication is that, for Laplanche, the purely biological register (self-preservation) completely falls outside the realm of human sexuality – and thus transcends the realm of psychoanalysis. This also holds significant implications for the status of the death drive.

In his lecture 'Masochism and the General Theory of Seduction' (1991), Laplanche states: 'It is a total metabolisation of the biologistic concepts in Freud which allows him to take them as

the banners – life drives and death drives – of forces whose only field of activity is the human psyche, or more precisely, its sexual psyche' (Laplanche 1991: 213). For Laplanche, it is clear that by virtue of its scope the death drive cannot but be understood exclusively as a sexual drive. At the same time, he implicitly admits the non-evident nature of his strong claim, complaining that '[t]he death drive offers, nowadays, a screen of immunity to whoever wishes to develop in psychoanalysis any "romantic", "pessimist" and eventually Heideggerian conceptions'. In contrast to these notions, Laplanche articulates an alternative interpretation as stemming from the need 'to think on our own' (Laplanche 1991: 213). If the death drive is already within the purview of psychoanalysis, it is imperative to categorize it as sexual, according to Laplanche.

Notwithstanding, one may legitimately inquire whether Laplanche disregard of the re-contextualization of Freud's concept within the Romantic and Pessimist tradition does not entail a (strategic) reduction of its Freudian significance. A hint that Laplanche may have been aware of this, can be found in 'The so-called "Death Drive": A Sexual Drive', Laplanche's last but most explicit article devoted to the subject. According to Laplanche, the death drive is an integral component of the psychoanalytic discourse, and thus it must be sexual. It appears as though there is no viable alternative. A precise contextualization is required. He argues that the death drive 'can only be correctly situated at a specific moment in the drama of the Freudian discovery', referring to the fore-mentioned turn in the wake of 'On Narcissism' (SE XIV 1957 [1914]). When Laplanche states that "outside of that context, it becomes an empty formula", he clearly refers to the Kleinian interpretation of the death drive (1999 [1997]: 49).[7]

For the first time, however, Laplanche goes a step further by examining the notion of the death drive as an example of Freud's 'errors' and as the root cause of numerous misunderstandings. Consequently, he asks the following question: 'Once the true opposition has been established, that between the bound and unbound forms of libido at work in psychical conflict, can we not attempt to formulate things in a renewed metapsychology; and thus, in the colloquial expression, quite simply "chuck out" [*jeter*] the death drive?' (1997: 49-50). In contrast to this most radical response, however, Laplanche proposes the reinterpretation of the death drive in terms of an internal otherness. He maintains that: 'In this sense, the so-called death drive is in effect that "pure culture" of otherness that we detect in the deepest layers of the unconscious'. In this way, he concludes that 'in the grandiose of life and death drives, there is nothing mysterious or metaphysical. In question are two principles, of binding and unbinding, whose opposition is at work on the inside of the psychic apparatus' (1999 [1997]: 52). Laplanche later reformulated this idea, writing an introduction to the French translation of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. In this final contribution, Laplanche regards Freud's introduction of the death drive as 'inscribed in an attempted conceptualization that would draw metapsychology in the direction of a theory of trauma in which psychic conflict would be mainly between forces of binding and forces of unbinding' (2010: 126).

The death drive as an enigmatic signifier for the General Theory of Seduction

Upon retrospective examination of Laplanche's persistent struggle with the death drive, it appears that the initial perspective presented in *Life and Death in Psychoanalysis* (1970) was

[7] Laplanche's strong criticism of Klein's work is related to her strong biologism and to her continuation of the late Freud, including its central importance of the death drive.

never retracted. He never refrained from considering the death drive's 'forced introduction' as being '*seductive and traumatic*' (1970: 107). His interpretation and critique of the death drive – claiming it to be a sexual drive – is, however, fully dependent on the General Theory of Seduction, including its focus on the realm of sexuality as intrinsically traumatic. By giving a pivotal role to the asymmetry between child and adult sexuality, a crucial element in Freud's *Three Essays* (1905) and in accordance with Sándor Ferenczi's 'Confusion of Tongues Between the Adults and the Child' (2002 [1933]), Laplanche re-problematizes the entire Freudian corpus through the lens of psychoanalysis' foundational early texts, namely *Studies on Hysteria* (1895), *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900), and *Three Essays* (1905). Since, in these texts, hysteria explicitly functions as Freud's research matrix, it follows that Laplanche problematizes the entire Freudian corpus against the backdrop of this hysterical research matrix (including the hysterogenic/erotogenic/libidinal body, the component drives, sexuality as intrinsically fragmented, etc.). Laplanche's spiral or helix model of theory development, which goes along with his argument that the death drive is no discovery but a re-discovery, suggests that Freud's early texts (on hysteria) continue to be the benchmark for his later work.

It is without a doubt that Laplanche's critical reading of Freud develops a productive strategy, opening up new and refreshing perspectives and 'putting Freud to work', as Laplanche would say. Nevertheless, it is imperative to require whether the central function and explanatory potential of the 'General Theory of Seduction' does not equally contribute to obscure the significance of subsequent concepts that do not align with it, such as the death drive. In other words, isn't Laplanche's reduction of the so-called 'narcissistic psychoneuroses' (Freud SE XIV 1957 [1915]: 196), such as melancholia, to hysteria doing injustice to Freud's differential diagnostics within the realm of the psychoneuroses?

Whereas Laplanche's reading adequately argues for the significance of 'On Narcissism' (1914), one could argue that it fails to take into account the text's ultimate consequences. In fact, the introduction of narcissism opens up a completely new spectrum of psychoneuroses, these are, narcissistic psychoneuroses – contrary to the familiar 'transference neuroses', such as hysteria and obsessional neurosis. It can thus be contended that Laplanche failed to adequately consider a significant text that was published in the wake of 'On Narcissism' (1914) and which exemplified the 'narcissistic turn' in Freud as identified by Laplanche, that is, 'Mourning and Melancholia' (1917). From that moment onwards, melancholia was not only considered the 'typical' example of 'narcissistic psychoneuroses' (Freud SE XIX 1961 [1924]: 152), but also started to function as Freud's subsequent research matrix – following hysteria and obsessional neurosis (De Vleminck 2013). The hypothesis that I intend to defend in discussion with Laplanche is that the function and significance of the death drive can only be understood against the backdrop of Freud's evolving clinical research interests during that period. Moreover, in *The Ego and the Id* (1923), it becomes particularly evident that there has been a shift towards melancholia as the focal point of his interest. Freud's model of melancholia reveals a distinct form of libidinal expression that was associated with the clinical picture of epilepsy, I will argue. This brings us back to the history of psychiatry and Hungarian psychoanalysts like Sándor Ferenczi and Lipót Szondi, amongst others (De Vleminck 2008).

Freud contra Laplanche? Towards a clinic of the death drive

Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920) is widely known to be a bizarrely composed and hermetic text, a 'metabiological and metacosmological speculation' in which the reader

gets lost time and time again (Laplanche 1999 [1997]: 43). According to Laplanche, it 'remains the most fascinating and baffling text of the entire Freudian *corpus*' (Laplanche 1970: 106). The poor reader thus cannot be blamed being seduced by the (in)famous examples mentioned quite at the beginning of the text: the dream life of 'traumatic neurosis', 'children's play' and 'repetition compulsion' (SE XVIII 1955 [1920]: 12-23). It has to be noted, of course, that these examples are extremely relevant in Freud's argument. At the same time, however, they contribute to the reader all to soon cherishing the illusion of having ultimately grasped what is at stake in Freud's text. I want to argue, however, that what Freud had in mind when writing *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* cannot be evoked by merely referring to the fore-mentioned examples.

It has to be noted that the concept of the death drive was not introduced in the final part of the book, where it is immediately linked with the general theme of aggression and with sadism and hatred more in particular.[8] Moreover, in all of Freud's subsequent texts, the death drive is exclusively dealt with in relation to aggression. Consequently, without failing to appreciate the importance of Freud's fore-mentioned initial examples in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, I want to re-interpret the latter phenomena as being peripheral in relation to the theme of aggression, instead of vice versa. Correspondingly, I would like to argue in favour of the thesis that, in Freud's perspective, human aggressiveness is the domain *par excellence* where the manifestations of the death drive can be discerned – without implying that all manifestations of the death drive should be exclusively reduced to aggression.

When focusing on the Freudian connection between aggression and the death drive, one is tempted to straightforwardly conceive the death drive in terms of what Freud defines as external manifestations of aggression, displayed in the phenomena of sadism and hatred. Despite of this, it must be clear that for Freud both sadism and hatred still implied libidinal expressions, in any case presupposing a fusion of the death drive with Eros. Even though the degree of this fusion can fluctuate in time and eventually can debouch into an extreme degree of drive defusion, sadism and hatred only can be determined as sexual aggression. Hence, Freud's all too simplistic interpretation of sadism and hatred in terms of the death drive only seems to obscure these clinical phenomena and, thus, does not seem to contribute to a further clarification of the latter. If this is in fact the case, it is imperative to question: What specific kind of aggression did Freud envision when he introduced the death drive, and, what advantages can be gained from implementing a concept like the death drive? An indication for an answer to this question, can be found in *The Ego and the Id* (1923), a text which is generally known for the introduction of the so-called second topography. At the same time, however, it is one of Freud's important studies on melancholia, integrating his earlier intuitions from 'Mourning and Melancholia' (1917) with the new concept of the death drive.

Despite the fact that melancholia was already mentioned in both Freud's pre-analytical and very early analytical texts, his landmark study 'Mourning and Melancholia' remains one of the most cited texts on the subject of depression and suicide. According to Freud, the pathological condition of melancholia is the clinical locus *par excellence* where the very tense relationship between the super-ego and the ego is revealed in an exemplary and magnified way. Determining his research interests since 'Mourning and Melancholia', the clinical phenomena of melancholia occupy a central role in Freud's reasoning about the

[8] Unlike Jonathan Lear, who states that Freud didn't but address the theme aggression in psychoanalytic theory until the introduction of the death drive (Lear 2005: 160-62), I argue that the topic is present in Freud's thinking form the very beginning (De Vleminck 2013).

interrelation between pathology and normality. Since then, melancholia started to function as the predominant meta-psychological research model in Freud's writings. From 1915 onwards, melancholia replaces hysteria and obsessional neurosis respectively, as the prototypical framework to discuss the psychopathological condition in general.

Although auto-aggressive manifestations, including suicidal inclinations, are equally common clinical features of obsessional neurosis, their most extreme examples can be found in melancholia. Consequently, Freud holds the conviction that in melancholia the death drive is revealed in its purest possible form. The particular way Freud is describing melancholia no doubt testifies of his major fascination with the extreme, disproportionate and merciless character of the drive discharge displayed in this pathological condition. According to Freud, the death drive, which manifests itself in the auto-aggression of the super-ego against the ego, must be interpreted as an expression of force that lacks any interest in life or any care for it. The latter intuition reveals itself in a magnified way in the human possibility of suicide, as it was discussed by Freud in the context of the melancholic disposition. Yet, the central issue of suicide must in principle be understood as having a universally-human significance, implying an existential possibility of what it is to be human.

Linking up the melancholic splitting of the ego with the death drive in *The Ego and the Id*, Freud famously stated: 'What is now holding sway in the super-ego is, as it were, a pure culture of the death drive, and in fact it often enough succeeds in driving the ego into death' (SE XIX 1961 [1923]: 53). What for Freud is so enigmatic about the problem of suicide, however, essentially has to do with the uncanny idea that man carries the possibility of auto-destruction within himself, in such a way that the drive for self-preservation risks to be foiled and defeated by it. According to Freud, the condition of melancholia reveals the extent to which the super-ego serves as 'a kind of gathering place for the death drives' (SE XIX 1961 [1923]: 54). What is revealed here again, is the possibility of an aimless lapse, a radicalization and an excessive expression of the drives as an aspect of the ego's constitution. Among the clinical examples discussed by Freud figure the extreme feeling of guilt, moral masochism and the negative therapeutic reaction. In each of these instances, Freud encounters manifestations of a force that disrupts any form of creativity and extends beyond pleasure and unpleasure.

After re-contextualizing the death drive as originating in the research context of melancholia, the question which remains unsolved, however, is the following: which particular phenomena Freud exactly does want to pinpoint with the death drive, in such way that he was not able to articulate the former in any other way before? In order to answer this question, it could be worth focusing on the specific drive character of the death drive. Besides the fact that, for Freud, the expression of the death drive always implies a certain degree of sexualization, he is particularly intrigued by it's monotonous, nonfunctional and persistent nature, which contrasts with the plasticity and creativity of Eros. Although Eros is regarded as the mandatory counterpart of the death drive, solely capable of expressing itself through fusion of the drives, Freud frequently refers to the clinical picture of epilepsy when re-evaluating the possibility of the 'defused' death drive (De Vleminck 2010). In *The Ego and the Id*, he asserts 'that the epileptic fit is a product and an indication of a defusion [of the drives]' (SE XIX 1961 [1923]: 41). As such, it can be argued that, when Freud is situating the death drive in the clinical research context of melancholia, epilepsy functions as his reference point in order to grasp the death drive's specific character.

During the time period he was writing *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920), Freud published 'The "Uncanny"' [1919]. In this study, he connects the idea of the uncanny to both 'the dominance' and the 'demonic character' of a so-called 'inner "compulsion to repeat"' ([1919]: 238). Instead of understanding 'repetition' in terms of a cyclic recurrence of the same, it should be understood, in contrast, as a seemingly infinitely persevering force which is continuously insisting to express itself in diverse, repeatedly changing circumstances. After all, it is Eros, which offers plasticity to the monotony of the death drive. Correspondingly, the perseverance of the death drive should not be depicted as a continuous repetition of merely and 'exactly the same'. To the contrary and more adequately, it must be interpreted in terms of a continuously persisting 'more of the same kind of thing'. Because of the varying contextual circumstances, the latter is repeatedly perceived as being surprisingly different: as a surprisingly new variation of a very familiar theme. This description remarkably coincides with Freud's depiction of the uncanny, that is, as the mixture of both 'the frightening' and 'what is known of old and long familiar' ([1919]: 220). In this context, Freud himself refers to 'doubts whether an apparently animate being is really alive; or, conversely, whether a lifeless object might not be in fact animate'.

Freud's fascination with the automatic or mechanical character 'beyond' the drives, associated with the demonic character of the uncanny, recalls him of the clinical picture of epilepsy. The nature of the automaton assumingly leads him to 'add the uncanny effect of epileptic fits' ([1919]: 226). Seemingly incidentally, Freud stages the epileptic fit as the prototypical example of drive defusion. He argues that beyond the uncanny epileptic discharge 'we have a glimpse of the identity of the underlying mechanism of drive discharge' (SE XXI 1961 [1928]: 180). These seemingly dysfunctional drive discharges show strong similarities with the sudden frenzy of a tantrum, in which one is 'besides oneself' with anger. The emotion of anger reveals a very specific internal dynamics and displays a paroxysmal, destructive, blinding power having no pity with anyone or anything – including oneself.

Even though Freud mainly focuses on epileptic seizures, the clinical picture of epilepsy entails another characteristic which can be linked to Freud's description of the death drive. For, the so-called 'inter-ictal period', that is, the period between epileptic fits or attacks, besides by heightened irritability, is also characterized by so-called 'viscosity' (Blumer 1984). What this viscosity and epileptic aggression both have in common, is their mechanic, automatic, monotonous character. Equally rigorously persisting to express its force, the death drive, nevertheless, reveals itself in a different and very specific way this time. At this point, the phenomenon of so-called 'psychical inertia' can be mentioned, confronting us with the death drive as an obstinate force, destroying all creativity and all life affirming power. We have met this obstinate, unyielding aspect of the death drive before, when referring to the negative therapeutic reaction. Freud, however, links the latter phenomenon to a general characteristic of the neuroses, stating that 'the drive defusion and the marked emergence of the death drive call for particular consideration among the effects of some severe neuroses' (SE XIX 1961 [1923]: 42). According to Freud, 'the power of the compulsion to repeat' (SE XX 1959 [1926]: 159) expresses itself in a phenomenon described as 'fixation' (2017 [1905]: 90). He refers to a 'peculiar "psychical inertia", which opposes change and progress' (SE XIV 1957 [1915b]: 272).

The confrontation with this psychical inertia leads Freud to confess his therapeutic pessimism in 'Analysis Terminable and Interminable' (1937). There, he refers to a group of clinical cases, amongst others, in which 'we are surprised by an attitude in our patients which can

only be put down to a depletion of the plasticity, the capacity for change and further development, which we should ordinarily expect' (SE XXIII 1964 [1937]: 241). In these patients, Freud discerns manifestations of what he calls 'psychical inertia', implying that 'all the mental processes, relationships and distributions of force are unchangeable, fixed and rigid' (SE XXIII 1964 [1937]: 242). The character of this psychical inertia and rigidity is described as follows: 'One finds the same thing in very old people, in which case it is explained as being due to what is described as force of habit or an exhaustion of receptivity – a kind of psychical entropy. But we are dealing here with people who are still young' (SE XXIII 1964 [1937]: 242). Freud adds: 'Our theoretical knowledge does not seem adequate to give a correct explanation of such types. Probably some *temporal* characteristics are concerned – some alterations of a *rhythm of development* in psychical life which we have not yet appreciated' (SE XXIII 1964 [1937]: 242; my italics). One could hold that, in this case, the 'alternations' and 'rhythm' Freud is talking about are related to the degree of both fusion and defusion of the drives. The monotonous, automatic and uncanny character of the death drive's repetition compulsion, articulating itself in connection with Eros, does not express itself but from the very moment the death drive discharges in a defused, excessive way. This second figure, too, can be discerned clinically in a melancholic depression, resembling the unbearable burden of being, a dead weight or the persistent force of habit.

It must be clear that the research context of melancholia does present a totally different perspective on the meaning of the death drive. Indisputably, Freud frequently gives the impression of being in favour of a teleological interpretation of the concept, that is, of conceiving of the death drive as aiming at death as its ultimate goal. The latter interpretation no doubt echoes Late Romantic sediments of the term, as we can encounter them in the works of the Russian psychiatrist Ilya Metchnikoff (1903), amongst others. Yet, these Late Romantic sirens probably have hindered Freud to explain the death drive unambiguously as a death-like drive: an automatic-mechanic, monotone and purposeless drive which is resisting to blend with life and which, in extreme circumstances, can lead to death. Death is not the goal, but certainly it can be the effect, as the riddle of suicide revealed to Freud.

To conclude

Although Laplanche identifies 'On Narcissism' (1914) as the turning point in Freud's thinking, he appears to underestimate the significance and impact of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920). In a certain sense, Laplanche thereby overlooks the development of the various psychopathological models, including hysteria and obsessional neurosis, which hold a significant position in Freud's early psychoanalytic work. With Laplanche, I want to emphasize the importance of the narcissistic turn in Freud's work. Yet, I would prefer to focus on the effects of this turn on Freud's clinical interests. Following the introduction of narcissism (1914), Freud's focus shifts towards melancholia as the prototype of narcissistic psychoneuroses. In contrast to Laplanche, for whom the death drive remains an 'enigmatic signifier', I wish to draw attention to melancholia as the context of origin for Freud's hypothesis of the death drive. My attention consequently shifts to 'Mourning and Melancholia' (1915-17), which I deem to be the meta-psychological prelude to *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920). I disagree with Laplanche's reading of Freud in terms of continuity, developing in the form of a spiral or a helix. According to Laplanche, later concepts, such as the death drive, can only be understood *Nachträglich* (*après-coup*) for they articulate something that was already present but could not yet be expressed.

In contrast to Laplanche, I propose an understanding of the development of Freudian thought in terms of discontinuity. This involves a succession of distinct psychopathological models or *matrices* over a period of time. Instead of a 'grand unifying theory', of which Laplanche's General Theory of Seduction is an example, I develop a kaleidoscopic patho-analytical theory based on several successive pathological models, each of which magnifies a different aspect of what is 'human, all too human'. My patho-analytical reading of Freud is inspired by Freud's own metaphor of the broken crystal.[9] This very idea of different pathologies revealing different possible modes ('possibilities') of human existence, cannot, however, be reduced or set aside as merely an *a posteriori* legitimation of Freud's psychoanalytic research rationale. To the contrary, it seems to function as one of the methodological principles *par excellence* that, from the very beginning, are guiding the Freudian project.[10] My patho-analytical approach thus implies an alternative strategy of 'putting Freud to work', thinking through Freud's own method, in order to disclose the significance of the death drive.

It seems that the death drive is confronting Laplanche with the limits of his General Theory of Seduction. From the perspective of Laplanche's thinking-trough of the Copernican revolution, Freud's *per se* non-sexual death drive – according to the Freudian drive dualism – once again confronts us with an indigestible Ptolemaic remainder on the other side of sexuality. Freud refers to an aspect of life that cannot be fully recovered by the sexual and that resists any complete binding. The death drive then corresponds to an energetic force that can be partially and temporarily subdued by Eros, yet persistently evades it. Thus, we may be returning to Lacan, who acknowledged the enigmatic nature of the death drive, but understood it as 'constitutive of the fundamental position of the human subject' (Lacan 1975: 172). Laplanche cannot comprehend that the death drive represents the return of the real that continues to define us as 'extimacy' (*extimité*) despite the decentring of the subject (Miller 1994). Freud's death drive confronts Laplanche with a return of Ptolemy, a return of the vital order, which forces humanity back onto itself. Despite the presence of 'the other' (*der Andere*) as fellow human (*Nebenmensch*), it persists in appearing enigmatically as 'the other' (*das Andere*) within ourselves, which precedes any translation and thus fundamentally escapes it. The specific discussion regarding the death drive thus adds an additional meaning to Laplanche's general statement that, '[i]f Freud is his own Copernicus, he is also his own Ptolemy' (Laplanche 1992: 61).

Abbreviations

SE *The Standard Edition of The Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*. 24 Vols. (trans.) J. Strachey. London: The Hogarth Press and The Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1953-1974.

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[9] '[W]e are familiar with the notion that pathology, by making things larger and coarser, can draw our attention to normal conditions which would otherwise have escaped us' (Freud SE XXII 1964 [1933]: 58).

[10] 'It is not until we have studied pathological phenomena that we can get an insight into normal ones' (Freud SE VII 1953 [1890]: 286).

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