

Escaping the Death Drive: Epicurean Philosophy as a Path Forward for Psychoanalysis

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Abstract

This paper critically examines Freud's theory of the death drive, as presented in his essay *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, by juxtaposing it with Epicurus' philosophy of pleasure and tranquility. Freud's concept of the death drive is based on the assumption that the human psyche harbors an inherent tendency toward self-destruction and a return to a state of inertia, which, according to his theory, is the ultimate consequence of the pleasure principle. This paper challenges Freud's conclusion, arguing that his methodological framework—rooted in the economic model of psychic energy—limits his interpretation of the pleasure principle. Philosophers such as Paul Ricoeur and Jacques Derrida have noted that Freud's dismissal of classical philosophical systems as metaphysical hindered his ability to engage with alternative paradigms of pleasure and human flourishing. One such paradigm is the Epicurean theory of pleasure, which provides a philosophical model that embraces pleasure as the central goal of life while avoiding the pitfalls of excess and self-destruction. Epicurus distinguishes between kinetic pleasures, derived from the satisfaction of bodily and mental needs, and katastematic pleasures, characterized by the absence of pain (ἀπονία) and mental disturbance (ἀταραξία). The latter represents a state of equilibrium and contentment that does not seek further increase or intensification. This distinction challenges Freud's reduction of pleasure to a quantitative principle and offers a qualitative framework in which stability, rather than inertia, is the culmination of human striving.

By integrating Epicurus' concepts of ἀπονία and ἀταραξία, this paper proposes that the absence of psychic tension does not signify psychic inertia, as Freud suggests, but rather a stable foundation for experiencing life's intrinsic joys. This Epicurean framework redefines the role of the pleasure principle as enabling sustained engagement with the world rather than withdrawal from it. Ultimately, this paper underscores the value of revisiting Epicurean philosophy as a way forward for psychoanalysis. By embracing the Epicurean emphasis on stable, qualitative pleasures and rejecting unnecessary desires, psychoanalysis can transcend the constraints of Freud's economic model. In doing so, it can move beyond the deterministic trajectory of the death drive toward a more optimistic, life-affirming understanding of human psychology. This interdisciplinary dialogue highlights the enduring relevance of classical philosophy in addressing the fundamental questions of modern psychological science.

Keywords

Freud, Epicurus, Psychoanalysis, Philosophy, Pleasure, Death, Drive theory

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Introduction

Freud was not unaware of classical philosophical teachings. According to Richard Sterba [1], who worked closely with him, Freud attended a humanistic Gymnasium, where he engaged in rigorous studies of Greek and Latin philosophy and literature. Over eight years, eight hours per week were dedicated to Latin, while six years were devoted to Greek, with six hours per week. The curriculum included comprehensive studies of major authors such as Homer, Sophocles, Plato, Tacitus, and Seneca, both in classroom settings and through private lessons with his professor. While Sterba highlights that these humanistic studies exerted a great influence on Freud's character, values, and attitude [1], it is interesting that his methodological stance toward philosophy is generally considered hostile. Freud, deeply influenced by the Vienna Circle, logical positivism and Frantz Brentano, sought to establish psychoanalysis as a scientific field, strictly structured according to the principles and methods of the positive sciences [Note 1]. At the same time, he endeavored to distance psychoanalysis as much as possible from philosophical interpretation, which he regarded, following the scientific circles of his era, as scientifically unverifiable and, therefore, metaphysical. This attitude toward philosophy is clearly captured in his works. For example, in *Some Elementary Lessons in Psycho-Analysis*, he mentions:

Not everyone is bold enough to make judgements about physical matters; but everyone, the philosopher and the man in the street alike, has his opinion on psychological questions and behaves as if he were at least an amateur psychologist. [2]

Freud suggests here that the philosopher is fundamentally akin to the ordinary person in regard to their opinions on psychological matters. Both articulate their views without truly understanding the underlying dynamics and tend to make speculative conclusions, without adhering to the rigorous methods of the positive sciences or relying on empirical data. This notion, as I will elaborate in the following pages, is also prominently expressed in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, where the psychoanalyst asserts that previous philosophical discussions concerning pleasure are, to a large extent, irrelevant to the psychoanalytic approach. Furthermore, Freud criticizes philosophers' attitudes toward his approach to dreams and their resistance to his concept of the unconscious [2]. The culmination of his hostile stance toward traditional philosophical thought is perhaps most clearly expressed in "The Claims of Psycho-Analysis to Scientific Interest," where he posits that philosophers provide particularly intriguing subjects for psychoanalytic study. He emphasizes a connection between religiosity and obsessional neurosis, ultimately concluding that speculative philosophical inquiry is intrinsically paranoiac [3].

Therefore, it appears that there are at least two factors underlying Freud's attitude. First, his stance can be understood as a reaction to the resistance he encountered from philosophers regarding his groundbreaking concept of the "unconscious" and his interpretation of dreams [Note 2] [4]. Second,

it may also be attributed to his tendency toward speculative thinking, often unsupported by empirical evidence, a methodological choice profoundly influenced by the intellectual climate of his time.

In this paper, I will focus on the analysis of this latter factor explaining Freud's criticism of philosophy through the analysis of one of his influential treatises, namely *Beyond the pleasure principle*. The goal of my paper is to demonstrate how Freud's aforementioned methodological choice (one to which, as I will suggest, he ultimately may not have remained entirely faithful) led him to deeply controversial conclusions regarding human motivation. These conclusions, as both psychoanalysts and philosophers suggest, might have been avoided if Freud had taken into account prior discussions concerning the pleasure principle and its consequences for human conscience.

In order to achieve this goal my paper is divided into three sections. First, in section two, I will present Freud's attitude towards philosophy focusing precisely on the concepts of the "pleasure principle" (Lustprinzip) and the "death drive" (Todestrieb). As I will suggest, following Jacques Derrida [5], Freud's *Beyond the pleasure principle* is ultimately a way for him to engage with philosophy while simultaneously maintaining his distance. Nevertheless, Freud's unrecognized debts to classical philosophy, especially to Epicurus, returns to haunt him [6]. Second, in section three, I will focus on Freud's argumentation in *Beyond the pleasure principle* and his conclusion that "the death drive (Todestrieb) is the *only logical* consequence of the pleasure principle (Lustprinzip)" [7]. As I will suggest, on the one hand, following psychoanalysts like Brown, this conclusion is deeply problematic for psychoanalysis as a practice as it renders psychoanalysis to a dialectical stage of despair. On the other hand, while Freud suggests that "the death drive (Todestrieb) is the *only logical* consequence of the pleasure principle (Lustprinzip)" I will advocate that following his own argumentation the death drive is neither a necessary nor a sufficient consequence of the pleasure principle but only a consequence of Freud's economic understanding of the drives [8], namely Freud's assumption that pleasure has only quantitative and not qualitative dimensions. Lastly, to further support this conclusion, I will focus on Epicureanism, conducting a comparative study of Epicurus' theory of human motivation alongside Fechner's and Freud's drive theories. As I will argue, while Epicurus, Fechner, and Freud all understand the pursuit of pleasure and the avoidance of pain as the fundamental motives of human nature, Epicurus' qualitative interpretation of pleasure allows him to avoid the interpretative problems that Freudian psychoanalysis struggles to resolve. Nevertheless, as discussed earlier, although Freud was well aware of the philosophical traditions of the Hellenistic and Roman periods, he chose to completely overlook Epicurus' contribution to the discourse on pleasure, a methodological choice that warrants further detailed examination.

Freud's Pleasure Principle and the phantom of Epicurus

Jacques Derrida [5] is the first notable scholar to have thoroughly examined the influence of Epicurean thought on Freud's psychoanalytic work, a connection Freud himself appears to either overlook or remain entirely unaware of. Derrida references Freud's 1901 paper, *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, where Freud narrates an incident of forgetting the name of Gassendi, the 17th-century thinker renowned for reestablishing Epicureanism as an acceptable scientific and religious philosophy. As Freud notes:

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 of 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. [9]

Freud attributes his recurring forgetfulness of Gassendi's name to feelings of guilt over falsely claiming a long-standing interest in Gassendi during his university examinations. However, Derrida, in his characteristic and sometimes ironic style, criticized Freud for failing to recognize psychoanalysis's indebtedness to Epicureanism. Derrida observes that one might say Freud simultaneously identifies and transfers a symptom that could be termed: *the disciple of Epicurus and the forgetting of his name*. Furthermore, Derrida suggests that both psychoanalysis itself and the challenges it must confront might also be understood as symptoms of Freud's broader neglect in acknowledging the influence of Epicurean thought. [5]

Freud's inclination to "forget" the origins of his theories has indeed been a subject of extensive scholarly discussion. In *On the History of the Psychoanalytic Movement* [10], Freud introduces the concept of "cryptomnesia," referring to the unintentional forgetting of the sources of his ideas. While he treats cryptomnesia with a degree of humor, both Derrida [5] and also scholars such as Todd Dufresne [11] argue that these omissions are significant, as they indicate Freud's hesitation to credit both classical philosophers and contemporaries like Adler and Stekel. For example, Wilhelm Stekel, a close associate in the psychoanalytic circle, was the first to use the term "Thanatos" to signify the death drive in 1909, yet Freud never acknowledges this contribution. The same pattern appears in relation to Epicurus. According to Yahalom [6], Freud does not

refer to Epicurus at all in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, despite both clear thematic overlaps in their ideas and the potential Epicurean influence on *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. As he notes:

We now know that around the time he wrote *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* he [Freud] was reading the works of Epicurean-inspired French essayist, Michel de Montaigne (Riedel-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 [6].

In my view, Freud's reluctance to acknowledge the influence of other philosophers arises from his concern that associating psychoanalysis with philosophical underpinnings might undermine its scientific credibility and foundation. This apprehension is evident in his *Autobiographical Study*, where he remarks:

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... [12].

This separation between psychoanalysis and philosophy becomes particularly pronounced in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. From the opening pages, Freud criticizes philosophy for relying on speculative methods, asserting that philosophical arguments about pleasure are of little relevance to the psychoanalytic approach. What is especially intriguing, however, is that despite Freud's preliminary assertions about the epistemological strength of psychoanalysis and the epistemological limitations of philosophy, when he introduces the concept of the death drive in chapter five, he states:

What now follows is speculation, often quite extravagant speculation, which readers will regard or disregard according to their own particular standpoint. For the rest, it is an attempt to follow an idea right through to its logical conclusion, undertaken out of sheer curiosity as to where this will lead [7].

Derrida's [5] meticulous analysis of Freud's text highlights how Freud's philosophical debts resurface to complicate his work, or as Yahalom nicely puts it: *how Freud's philosophical debts return to haunt him* [6]. As I will elaborate in the following section, it was Freud's methodological choices that brought him to an impasse regarding the implications of the pleasure principle. To navigate this deadlock, Freud resorted to the very methodological approach he had previously criticized, namely speculation. However, even this speculative turn may not have been sufficient to salvage his reasoning.

Beyond the Pleasure principle: The death drive as the goal of human nature

As I have already mentioned, Freud argues that philosophy reaches its conclusions through speculation, not grounded in scientific data, and, as such, its methodology cannot contribute to the development of the strictly scientific perspective that psychoanalysis seeks to provide. From the very first lines of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud declares that pleasure must be studied following the economic principle. Consequently, Freud limits himself to examining the quantitative dimension of pleasure—that is, the amount of satisfaction achieved through the discharge of psychic tension. As he notes:

In psychoanalytic theory we assume without further ado that the evolution of psychic processes is automatically regulated by the pleasure principle; that is to say, we believe that these processes are invariably triggered by an unpleasurable tension, and then follow a path such that their ultimate outcome represents a diminution of this tension, and hence a propensity to avoid unpleasure or to generate pleasure. When, in our study of psychic processes, we look at them with specific reference to this manner in which they evolve, we introduce the 'economic' perspective into our work [7].

As Jean Laplanche explains in *Le Vocabulaire de la psychanalyse* [8], with his economic perspective, Freud sought to explain mental activity and pleasure in terms of "energy," "forces," and "quantity," rejecting the possibility of discussing qualitative differences between various types of pleasure. This choice reflects the influence of the natural sciences on his thinking, while simultaneously dismissing previous discussions on hedonism and pleasure, which bring qualitative distinctions to the forefront and claim that pleasure is not merely a quantitative measure. Such discussions, as Derrida notes [5], can be found in the works of both Aristotle and Epicurus, with whom, however, Freud refuses to engage. This refusal becomes evident in the following passage, where Freud insists that, in his pursuit of understanding the nature of pleasure, no philosophical or psychological theory can assist him:

On the other hand, we would gladly acknowledge our gratitude to any philosophical or psychological theory capable of revealing to us the meaning of these sensations of pleasure and unpleasantness that are so imperative for us. In this respect, unfortunately, nothing of any use is available to us. This is the darkest and most impenetrable area of the psyche, and whilst we cannot possibly avoid touching upon it, it seems to me that we do best to offer only the most tentative of suppositions on the subject [7].

Notwithstanding, Freud's somewhat premature declaration of his isolation in this pursuit, on the very next page of his work, he refers to the penetrating (as Freud describes him) Gustav Theodor Fechner, whose analyses of pleasure essen-

tially coincide with the framework imposed by psychoanalytic inquiry. In his work *Some Ideas on the History of the Creation and Evolution of Organisms*, Fechner discusses pleasure as follows:

Inasmuch as conscious impulses are always associated with pleasure or unpleasure, we may suppose that pleasure and unpleasure, too, are linked psycho-physically to conditions of stability and instability; and this gives grounds for a hypothesis that I shall develop in more detail elsewhere, namely that every psycho-physical motion that passes the threshold of consciousness involves pleasure to the degree that it moves beyond a certain point towards complete stability, and unpleasure to the degree that it moves beyond a certain point away from that stability; [13]

This is the conception of pleasure that Freud also adopts, asserting that the pleasure principle is closely linked to the *id*, one of the three components of his structural model of the psyche (the other two being the *ego* and *superego*). According to Freud, the *id* is the oldest and most primitive part of the mind, present from birth. It operates entirely unconsciously and is governed by the pleasure principle, which seeks immediate gratification of instinctual drives regardless of reality, logic, or morality. As the reservoir of instinctual drives, the *id* houses the raw, unorganized energy that motivates human behavior. It relentlessly seeks the immediate gratification of biological and psychological needs, such as hunger and sexual desire, regardless of circumstances, always pursuing the shortest path to pleasure. Following this line of reasoning, what, then, is the ultimate goal of human existence, the ultimate aim of this instinctual desire for pleasure? Freud provides the answer to this question as follows:

One of our strongest motives for believing in the existence of death drives is indeed the fact that we have perceived the dominant tendency of the psyche, and perhaps of nervous life in general, to be the constant endeavour – as manifested in the pleasure principle – to reduce inner stimulative tension, to maintain it at a steady level, to resolve it completely [...] If we may reasonably suppose, on the basis of all our experience without exception, that every living thing dies – reverts to the inorganic – for intrinsic reasons, then we can only say that the goal of all life is death, or to express it retrospectively: the inanimate existed before the animate [...] If one holds fast to the notion that the drives are exclusively conservative in nature, one cannot arrive at any other logical postulates concerning the origin and goal of life [than the death drive] [7].

Based on the aforementioned text, Freud develops the following argument regarding the ultimate goal of human nature:

1. The pleasure principle aims to completely eliminate the psychic tension experienced by the organism (based on Fechner's conception of drives).

2. Death represents the inanimate/inorganic state, the point at which the organism no longer experiences any psychic tension.
3. (From 1 and 2) Therefore, the pleasure principle ultimately aims at the death of the organism, and the principle of death is the only logical consequence of the pleasure principle.

Nevertheless there are three crucial objections that this Freudian conclusion needs to face. The first problem, as Brown points out, is that it transforms psychoanalytic practice into a dialectic of despair, which is particularly dangerous for the patient and of no use to the therapist. As Brown states:

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 [14].

Following this line of criticism, while the death drive may offer intriguing philosophical insights into human nature and motivation, it poses significant risks to patient well-being and provides little benefit to psychoanalytic practice. On the one hand, for patients, framing human nature as inherently self-destructive risks fostering a fatalistic worldview. Such a perspective may exacerbate feelings of hopelessness, especially in individuals struggling with depression or existential crises. It can erode a patient's sense of agency and belief in the possibility of personal growth or change, potentially deepening despair or even legitimizing harmful thoughts and behaviors. On the other hand, concerning psychoanalysts and psychoanalysis as a practice, Freud's concept of the death drive encounters issues that Freud himself identified as fundamental problems of philosophical thought. Its speculative and abstract nature lacks empirical support, making it challenging to apply meaningfully in therapeutic contexts. Moreover, focusing on the death drive may divert psychoanalysts from addressing more immediate and actionable concerns, such as resolving trauma, improving relational dynamics, or fostering healthier coping mechanisms.

Additionally, the death drive raises both ethical and methodological concerns. It simplifies the complexity of human motivation into a single, overarching principle, thereby overlooking the diversity of individual experiences and social contexts. By promoting a deterministic view of behavior, it risks undermining the psychoanalyst's efforts to empower patients to take responsibility for their lives and emotions, shifting the focus away from the potential for personal transformation. Finally, the concept's inherent complexity could lead to confusion when communicating with patients, ultimately hindering therapeutic progress rather than facilitating it.

Let us now turn to the second problem with Freud's argument. This issue arises from the fact that Freud's purely quantitative understanding of pleasure does not seem sufficient for grasping neither the phenomenon of seeking pleasure itself nor of human motivation. For instance, people often choose intellectual pleasures over physical ones, or vice versa, and the

motivation for these choices seems to be not the intensity or quantity of the pleasure but rather the qualitative difference in the pleasure they derive. For example, someone might choose reading a thought-provoking Freudian treatise over indulging in a delicious meal, not because reading the book provides more pleasure in terms of intensity or quantity, but because the pleasure derived from intellectual stimulation and personal growth feels more meaningful or fulfilling to them. On the other hand, someone might choose to engage in a physical activity like hiking or exercising rather than staying indoors to work or study, not because the physical activity provides more pleasure in terms of intensity, but because it offers a different, refreshing type of pleasure, one that involves physical well-being, connection with nature and a break from mental strain.

These examples, in contrast to Freud's economic perspective of pleasure, show that the choices individuals make can be driven by the distinct qualitative experiences they seek, rather than by the sheer amount of pleasure. Therefore, Freud's purely economic perspective is, above all, intuitively odd, as it appears to contradict the way the average person understands pleasure.

Finally, the third objection concerns Freud's position that the death drive is the only logical consequence of the pleasure principle. However, this conclusion does not seem to necessarily arise from the perspective of Fechner, which Freud advocates. More specifically, both Fechner and Freud claim that pleasure is the feeling we experience when psychic tension in the organism is reduced. However, unlike Freud, Fechner [13] never asserts that the ultimate goal of the pleasure principle is to reduce psychic tension to an absolute zero, thus reaching a point similar to the biological death of the organism. On the contrary, for Fechner, pleasure was not merely a sensation or mental state but a fundamental economic and dynamic characteristic of human life. According to him, the psychic system tends to seek states that increase pleasure and reduce discomfort, aiming at maintaining an active balance. Therefore, the ultimate goal of the psychic system is not the absolute elimination of tension, which Fechner believed is impossible anyway, but the creation of a balanced framework where psychic tension is low enough not to disturb mental equilibrium (tends toward zero but is never actually zero) and is simultaneously high enough to motivate action. Thus, the pleasure principle in Fechner's psychophysical theory does not simply understand pleasure as a "reduction of energy," but also as an efficient use of psychic energy that contributes to the organism's sustainability.

As Ricoeur [15] notes, Freud, in his reading of Fechner's work, confuses two phenomena: inertia and stability. For Freud, the goal of the human organism is to reach absolute inertia, where psychic tension is zero, and thus the psychic energy used to reduce tension is also zero. In contrast, Fechner, at no point in his work, seems to seek this kind of inertia, but instead advocates for a form of stability: a stability of psychic energy that, having reduced psychic tension as close to zero as possible, no longer needs to fluctuate but is fully channeled into pleasure itself, that is the enjoyment of life. Therefore, while pleasure, according to Fechner, functions according to

the laws of constancy, meaning it is experienced as a release of psychic tension, with the assumption that psychic energy will always be present, the death drive, according to Freud, operates under the laws of inertia, with the assumption that there will be no pleasure or psychic energy because there is no tension to be released.

As I see it, Freud's failure to understand this distinction is rooted precisely in the strict economic view of pleasure that he follows. If pleasure is the reduction of psychic tension and no other factor, likely qualitative, intervenes in this process, then when the psychic energy of the organism brings psychic tension to absolute zero, the goal would have been achieved, and the psychic energy would no longer have any purpose. In Freud's words, *the living being would have returned to the inorganic, fulfilling its internal purpose* [7].

As I will suggest in the following section, in order for us to truly speak of stability in psychic energy, which is channeled, as Fechner suggests, into the enjoyment of life itself and not just into reducing psychic tension, we must introduce qualitative distinctions within our system regarding pleasure. These qualitative distinctions illuminate the possible gradations and types of pleasure. Such gradations are already known, at least in the history of philosophy, from the work of Epicurus.

Epicurean theory of pleasure: quantitative and qualitative dimensions

Philosophy, as it is practiced today, is mostly abstract, theoretical, and detached from everyday life, merely an academic subject. In contrast, philosophy in the Greco-Roman world was something entirely different [16]. It was not just a subject of study but a way of life, an art of living. Philosophy was a practice aimed at alleviating suffering and reshaping the self in accordance with an ideal of wisdom. For the Greeks and Romans, practicing philosophy meant choosing a school and adopting its way of life. Each school offered its own set of spiritual and practical exercises, which aligned with their respective ideals of wisdom. Philosophy was, thus, not a speculative endeavor, as Freud frequently suggests, but a practical exercise designed to transform the lives of its followers. As Martha Nussbaum notes:

The Hellenistic philosophical schools in Greece and Rome-Epicureans, Skeptics, and Stoics, all conceived of philosophy as a way of addressing the most painful problems of human life. They saw the philosopher as a compassionate physician whose art could heal many pervasive types of human suffering. They practiced philosophy not as a detached intellectual technique dedicated to the display of cleverness but as an immersed and worldly art of grappling with human misery. They focused their attention, in consequence, on issues of daily and urgent human significance-the fear of death, love and sexuality, anger and aggression-issues that are sometimes avoided as embarrassingly messy and personal by the more detached varieties of philosophy [17].

Apparently, it is due to this therapeutic and practical orientation of Hellenistic-Roman philosophical schools that other modern psychological theories, like Cognitive-Behavioral therapy, have turned to these schools in order to draw on arguments and therapeutic techniques aimed at reducing human mental pain [18] [19]. One notable representative of these philosophical schools is Epicureanism.

Like most ancient Greek philosophers, Epicurus seeks happiness for humans (εὐδαιμονία). In other words, he advocates for a way of life or an art of living that, if followed, would enable people to lead completely happy lives. However, unlike Plato (*Definitiones* 412.d.10–12), Aristotle (*Eudemian Ethics* 1219a.38–39), and the Stoics (Diogenes Laertius 7.102, 7.104; Stobaeus, *Anthology* 2.79.1W, 2.82.5), Epicurus does not base happiness on virtue but on pleasure. Epicurus is a hedonist and argues that the ultimate goal, the one for which all actions are performed and to which all living beings aspire, is pleasure. As he states:

Letter to Menoeceus 129: This is why we say that pleasure is the beginning and end of the blessed life. For we recognize pleasure as the good which is primary and congenital; from it we begin every choice and avoidance, and we come back to it, using the feeling as the yardstick for judging every good thing. [Note 3] [20]

The above passage clearly reflects Epicurus' position that pleasure constitutes the essence of our happiness. The philosopher emphasizes that pleasure is a fundamental and natural good, and it is the only element, along with pain, that motivates us to undertake any action.

Epicurus was profoundly skeptical of and disillusioned with the society of his time. He maintained that society inherently corrupts human souls, fostering the creation of vain desires that disrupt peace of mind and, consequently, compel individuals to engage in misguided pursuits and actions. In this context, those living within society, and inevitably shaped by its influence, become estranged from their authentic nature and morally compromised.

Epicurus sought to examine and articulate the essence of human nature in its untainted, pre-societal state. He posited that by identifying the fundamental elements of this primordial, uncorrupted condition, it would be possible to understand humanity in its purest form, unblemished by the distortions imposed by societal constructs. According to Nussbaum:

To give this idea a vivid realization, Epicurus refers frequently to the child not yet corrupted by teaching and discourse-and also to the healthy animal, seen as a way of looking at our sensuous and bodily nature as human animals [17].

Epicurus refers to the uncorrupted nature of the child and the healthy animal as a foundational argument to demonstrate that pleasure and pain are the sole motivators of human action. This argument, commonly referred to in the literature as the "Cradle Argument," aims to illustrate that human nature itself,

when operating without external interference, free from the corrupting influences of society, consistently seeks pleasure and avoids pain [21].

If this premise holds true, it logically follows that pleasure and pain are the primary determinants guiding human choices and actions with respect to external objects. The Cradle Argument is preserved in three distinct versions across the surviving texts, all likely derived from a common source [17]. The first version is found in Diogenes Laertius, the second in Sextus Empiricus, and the third in Cicero. Let us now examine these three passages in detail:

Diogenes Laertius 10.137: As a proof for the fact that pleasure is the end, he points to the fact that animals, as soon as they are born, are well contented with pleasure and fight against pain, naturally and apart from discourse. For we flee pain by our very own natural feelings. [Note 4] [20]

Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* 3.194-195: Some people who come from the school of Epicurus like to say that the animal feels pain and pursues pleasure naturally and without teaching. For as soon as it is born, when it is not yet a slave to the world of opinion, as soon as it is slapped by the unaccustomed chill of the air, it cries out and bawls. [Note 5] [20]

Cicero, *De finibus bonorum et malorum* I.30: Every animal as soon as it is born pursues pleasure and delights in it as the chief good, while it flees pain as the chief evil and pushes it from itself as far as possible. And it does this when not yet perverted, with nature herself doing the judging in an uncorrupted and unblemished way. [Note 6] [20]

First, all three excerpts refer to a primal nature shared by both animals and humans. This primal nature is contrasted with a corrupted form of nature. At this juncture, Epicurus appears to be attempting to identify what human nature would be like if it had not been influenced by the teachings of society [17] [21].

Second, in all three excerpts, this primal, common animal nature consistently seeks pleasure and avoids pain. The clear conclusion we can draw from these passages is that animals and children, these primal, incorruptible souls referenced in the excerpts, are characterized by a desire for pleasure and an aversion to pain. In this context, as Brunschwig argues, the "Cradle Argument" does not suffice to prove that pleasure is the highest good. Rather, what the argument clearly demonstrates is the natural character of the pursuit of pleasure and the avoidance of pain, as observed in children and animals. Therefore, the argument does not prescribe what we ought to do (i.e., that we should seek pleasure and avoid pain); rather, it describes the inherent nature of children and animals and the motivations that drive them to action [21].

At this point, the first crucial similarity between Fechner, Freud, and Epicurus becomes evident. All three thinkers un-

derstood pleasure as the central motivator of human behavior. However, they situate pleasure within different contexts and philosophical frameworks. As we have already discussed in Section Two, Freud views pleasure purely in quantitative terms, denying any qualitative differences between pleasures; a conclusion that, as I have argued above, leads to certain objections. In contrast, Epicurus attempts to explain both the quantitative and qualitative aspects of pleasure.

Epicurus understands pleasure in two distinct ways: on the one hand, as "kinetic pleasure" and on the other, as "katastematic" or "static pleasure." As the terms themselves suggest, kinetic pleasure is associated with movement, while katastematic or static pleasure pertains to a stable state. According to Epicurus (Diogenes Laertius 2.87-89), kinetic pleasures are those we experience when our body returns to its normal state, whereas katastematic pleasures are those we experience once we have satisfied our desires and alleviated pain. For example, the pleasure I derive from eating food is, according to Epicurus, a kinetic pleasure, while the pleasure I feel when I am full and no longer hungry is katastematic. This distinction is further clarified in *De finibus bonorum et malorum* 1.37, where the Epicurean spokesman Torquatus states:

Cicero *De finibus bonorum et malorum* 1.37: The pleasure we pursue is not just that which moves our actual nature with some gratification and is perceived by the senses in company with a certain delight; we hold that to be the greatest pleasure which is perceived once all pain has been removed. [Note 7] [20]

In the aforementioned passage, two key elements emerge. First, Torquatus differentiates between two types of pleasure: one linked to our physical constitution (kinetic pleasure), and the other described as the highest form of pleasure (katastematic or static pleasure). Second, the passage associates both static and kinetic pleasures with sensation (*sensibus*). Pleasure, therefore, is not merely a matter of internal movement within the organism; rather, it pertains to the sensory perception of the organism's state. In this sense, kinetic pleasure refers to the pleasant sensation experienced when a need is satisfied or pain is alleviated, while katastematic pleasure pertains to the pleasant sensation the organism experiences when it is at peace, free from pain or disturbance [22] [23].

In psychoanalytic terms, the subject employs their psychic energy to alleviate the tension that has been created, but the ultimate goal of this process is not the attainment of inertia, as Freud argues. On the contrary, the goal is the achievement of stability, a state of the soul characterized by the absence of both bodily pain and mental disturbance. This state of stability aligns closely with the aforementioned Epicurean ideas of *ἀταραξία* and *ἀπονία*, wherein the subject experiences a harmonious equilibrium, free from the fluctuations of desire and suffering.

Let us now turn to some additional questions that will help clarify the distinction between kinetic and static pleasures. First, which pleasures are kinetic and which are static? A preliminary answer might suggest that kinetic pleasures, being related to

the satisfaction of needs, are primarily bodily pleasures, while static pleasure would consist solely of intellectual pleasures. However, this understanding is incorrect for two reasons.

First, static pleasure involves not only the absence of bodily pain but also the absence of mental disturbance, as seen in the state of *ἀταραξία*. Thus, static pleasure pertains to both bodily and intellectual aspects. Second, kinetic pleasures are not confined to the body. As Diogenes Laertius (D.L. 10.136) notes:

In *On choices* he [Epicurus] speaks as follows: 'Freedom from disturbance and absence of pain are static pleasures; but joy and delight are regarded as kinetic activities. [Note 8] [20]

Joy and delight, two intellectual pleasures, are characterized in the above passage as kinetic rather than static. Therefore, the distinction between kinetic and static pleasures does not align with the distinction between bodily and intellectual pleasures. Instead, the two distinctions intersect. Kinetic pleasures can be either bodily or intellectual, while human happiness (static pleasure) is connected to both the absolute absence of bodily pain (*ἀπνοία*) and the absolute absence of mental disturbance (*ἀταραξία*). In order to further understand these distinctions let us focus on the following passages:

Principal Doctrine 3: The removal of all pain is the limit of the magnitude of pleasures. [Note 9] [20]

Principal Doctrine 18: The pleasure in the flesh does not increase when once the pain of need has been removed, but it is only varied. And the limit of pleasure in the mind is produced by rationalizing those very things and their congeners which used to present the mind with its greatest fears (LS 21E). [Note 10] [20]

In the above passages, the absence of bodily pain (*ἀπνοία*) represents the limit of any bodily pleasure, beyond which its intensity cannot increase. On the other hand, the absence of mental disturbance (*ἀταραξία*) pertains to the subject's beliefs, which guide them in pursuing the satisfaction of specific desires. If these beliefs are incorrect, the subject will not attain either *ἀταραξία* or *ἀπνοία*, as the desires they pursue will be unattainable. Following this line of thought, Epicurus advocates for a complex form of human happiness, where pleasure in its ultimate form must be understood as both bodily (*ἀπνοία*) and mental (*ἀταραξία*).

Nevertheless, there is a final question that needs to be answered. Once pain is removed and we find ourselves in a state of stability, does this mean that feeling pleasure is no longer possible? Epicurus answers affirmatively, asserting that pleasure is indeed still possible, and our own experience and observation support this conclusion. However, the nature of pleasure experienced in such a state is no longer quantitative or kinetic; rather, it becomes stable and static. In this state, the body reaches the maximum level of pleasure it can experience, a level beyond which no further increase is possible. What remains, according to Epicurus, is not an increase in the

intensity of pleasure but rather a transformation or variation in its form [24] [25] [26].

Consider the following examples. When I am thirsty, I experience bodily discomfort, which induces bodily pain. By drinking, I satisfy this need, alleviate the pain, reduce the tension, and experience pleasure, specifically, bodily kinetic pleasure. Similarly, when I am angry or anxious, I experience mental distress, which generates mental tension. By listening to music or conversing with friends, I remove the pain, diminish the mental tension, and again experience pleasure, namely, mental kinetic pleasure.

However, what occurs when I find myself in a state of stability, wherein I no longer experience bodily pain or mental disturbance, in a state of *ἀπνοία* and *ἀταραξία*, as described by Epicurus? Can I still experience pleasure in such a state? That is, when I am no longer thirsty, can I not enjoy a flavorful glass of red wine? Or when I am neither anxious nor fearful, can I not appreciate the harmony of a musical composition or engage in a stimulating conversation with friends?

Epicurus' position is that, indeed, I can. The reason for this is that, when mental tension has been relieved and I no longer experience pain, it does not preclude the possibility of experiencing pleasure. Rather, it implies that the pleasure I experience in such a state of stability cannot be understood quantitatively. There is no further quantitative change in this type of pleasure because I am already experiencing the maximal pleasure my body can sustain, that is, the complete absence of both bodily and mental pain. As long as I maintain this state, the pleasure remains constant, altering only in form rather than fluctuating [24] [25] [26].

To borrow from Fechner's terms, the reduction of mental tension to a minimum does not imply the absence of mental energy. The state of stability, according to Fechner, or the state of *ἀταραξία* and *ἀπνοία*, according to Epicurus, is the condition that enables the subject to direct their mental energy toward the enjoyment of life itself and ordinary activities. These activities are appreciated not as means of relieving pain but as ends in themselves, inherently pleasant and fulfilling.

In summary, Freud's quantitative and economic understanding of pleasure, centered on the reduction of psychic tension, bears notable similarities to the Epicurean concept of kinetic pleasures. For Freud, pleasure arises from the release of excess energy and the resolution of internal tensions, aligning with his broader model of the mind as an economy of forces in constant flux. Similarly, Epicurean kinetic pleasures involve the active satisfaction of desires and the dynamic process of restoring the natural balance of the soul. However, in contrast to Freud's perspective, Epicurean katastematic pleasures emphasize the intrinsic value of a stable and serene mental state, one that emerges from the absence of pain (*ἀπνοία*) and mental distress (*ἀταραξία*), as well as the cultivation of a life free from unnecessary desires. These pleasures are qualitative in nature, grounded in the richness of existence itself and the deeper satisfaction that comes from living in harmony with one's natural needs and philosophical understanding. This perspective recognizes that pleasure is not solely the result of processes like tension-release but can also arise from the enduring experience of equilibrium and contentment.

If the above reasoning holds, then Freud's conclusion that the death drive is the only logical consequence of the pleasure principle is fundamentally flawed. On the contrary, the Freudian death drive emerges not as a natural consequence of the pleasure principle itself, but rather as a result of the economic perspective Freud adopts in his theories. This perspective is centered on the regulation of psychic energy, which, when misunderstood, leads Freud to a reductionist view where the death drive appears as a necessary counterforce to the pleasure principle [6].

Further philosophical critiques, particularly from thinkers like Ricoeur [15] and Derrida [5], focus on Freud's methodological approach as not just a product of his specific theories, but also reflecting the intellectual climate of his time. Freud's rejection of classical philosophical systems can be seen as an expression of the broader modernist reluctance to engage with metaphysical truths. For Freud, these classical frameworks were deemed inherently speculative, leaving no room for an empirical psychology that sought to explain human behavior in more reductionistic and scientific terms.

Thus, Freud's refusal to incorporate insights from classical philosophy into his psychoanalytic theory may have contributed to the emergence of his concept of the death drive [Note 11]. In contrast, an approach that takes into account the broader dimensions of human experience, such as that found in Epicureanism, may offer a more coherent and less fatalistic understanding of the pleasure principle.

Conclusion: Epicureanism as a Path Forward for Psychoanalysis

I may have given the impression that the purpose of my paper was to demonstrate that Freud and psychoanalysis failed where Epicurus and philosophy offered better descriptions of reality. However, I do not want this impression to persist, as my purpose is quite different. My goal was to highlight one of Freud's deeply problematic methodological choices, which was likely the source of the issues he faced. Freud tried to appropriate human psychology and the realm of emotions, attempting to explain them in terms he considered scientific, and, most importantly, to erect high walls between his perspective and the other systems that had studied the same issues, walls that inevitably led to his own conflicts.

In my view, the only way to truly understand such complex and multidimensional phenomena, like human emotions, is through interdisciplinary collaboration, that is, the harmonious cooperation of many scientific fields. This practice could be crucial even for psychoanalysis itself, as it may help overcome serious objections and dead ends, such as the understanding of death as the end of human life.

Freud's pleasure principle, as traditionally understood, posits that human behavior is primarily driven by the pursuit of pleasure and the avoidance of pain. However Freud's exclusive focus on the economic aspect of the pleasure principle, the balancing of psychic energy, may obscure a fuller understanding of human drives and their potential for stability and flourishing.

Nevertheless, Epicureanism seems to offer a distinct and complementary perspective to psychoanalysis. While Freud's theory remains focused on the dynamics of tension and its reduction, Epicurus presents a more nuanced view of pleasure, distinguishing both between bodily and mental pleasures and kinetic-katastematic pleasures. For Epicurus, the highest form of pleasure is not found merely in the removal of pain or the satisfaction of physical or psychological needs (kinetic pleasures), but in a state of stability where the mind is free from disturbance and the body from pain (katastematic pleasure). This idea challenges the Freudian model of pleasure as an ongoing search for relief and opens up the possibility of a new therapeutic path that does not aim solely at the reduction of suffering, but at the attainment of a harmonious state.

In psychoanalysis, integrating Epicurean concepts could involve reframing the therapeutic process. Rather than focusing only on reducing psychic tension or alleviating suffering, a more comprehensive approach would aim at fostering a stable, balanced psyche where both bodily and mental peace are prioritized. By recognizing the value of *ταραξία*, not just as the absence of conflict but as a state of positive, enduring pleasure, psychoanalysis could move beyond the economic reduction of tension and toward a deeper exploration of well-being, understood as the cultivation of long-term inner stability.

In practical terms, Epicureanism could provide psychoanalysis with a framework for addressing not only the immediate needs and traumas of the subject but also for guiding individuals toward a flourishing life characterized by the absence of unnecessary desires and the cultivation of inner peace. By focusing on the qualitative aspects of pleasure and the idea that true happiness comes from the satisfaction of simple, natural desires, psychoanalysis could encourage individuals to reevaluate their goals and perceptions of pleasure, ultimately leading to a more balanced and sustainable path to mental health and well-being.

Therefore, Epicureanism can offer psychoanalysis a new way to think about the pleasure principle, one that does not view pleasure as a constant pursuit of relief, but rather as the cultivation of a peaceful, stable state of mind and body, free from unnecessary disturbances. This shift could offer a more holistic approach to mental health, emphasizing both the reduction of suffering and the cultivation of lasting inner tranquility.

Notes

- [1] Franz Brentano and Sigmund Freud are often connected through the intellectual influence Brentano exerted on Freud during his formative academic years. Brentano, a philosopher and psychologist, is best known for his concept of intentionality, the idea that mental acts are always directed toward objects. While Freud would later diverge significantly from Brentano's approach, the foundational ideas Brentano introduced left a lasting impression on Freud's thinking. As a student at the University of Vienna, Freud attended some of Brentano's lectures. Brentano's clear and empirical approach to psychology, along with his revival of Aristotelian thought, resonated with Freud,

- who was deeply interested in understanding the human mind. Brentano's insistence on grounding philosophy and psychology in empirical observation aligned with Freud's eventual ambition to establish psychoanalysis as a science.
- [2] It is well-established that philosophers such as Karl Popper argued that Freud's theory of the unconscious could not be considered a scientific theory. More specifically, Popper criticized Freud for developing theories that could be adapted to explain any outcome, rendering them scientifically unfalsifiable [27]. Furthermore, Maurice Merleau-Ponty criticized the notion of the unconscious for being too vague and fluid [28], while Jean-Paul Sartre [29] and Simone de Beauvoir [30] challenged Freudian concepts of determinism, asserting that human beings possess a greater degree of freedom and responsibility for their actions than Freud's unconscious mechanisms suggest. Additionally, Michel Foucault [31] contested Freud's deterministic view of the unconscious, which posits that unconscious forces govern much of our thoughts and actions. Foucault, along with others in the postmodern tradition, argued that such a view undermines individual agency and freedom, reducing the person to a mere product of repressive social and psychological forces. Finally, Thomas Metzinger [32] criticized the reductionist aspects of Freudian psychoanalysis. According to Metzinger, Freud's explanations of the unconscious often reduce complex phenomena such as desire, repression, and trauma to biological and instinctual drives, an oversimplification that neglects the rich complexity of human consciousness and experience. Nevertheless, scholars of Hellenistic philosophy, particularly those studying Epicurus and Lucretius, have recognized the significance of unconscious and irrational motivation within Epicurean theory [33] [34]. This parallel may shed further light on the connection between psychoanalysis and Epicurean philosophy, as well as the role of the unconscious in the history of philosophy. I will return to this discussion in a forthcoming paper.
- [3] *Letter to Menoeceus* 129: Καὶ διὰ τοῦτο τὴν ἡδονὴν ἀρχὴν καὶ τέλος λέγομεν εἶναι τοῦ μακαρίως ζῆν. ταύτην γὰρ ἀγαθὸν πρῶτον καὶ συγγενικὸν ἔγνωμεν, καὶ ἀπὸ ταύτης καταρχόμεθα πάσης αἰρέσεως καὶ φυγῆς, καὶ ἐπὶ ταύτην κατανῶμεν ὡς κανόνι τῷ πάθει πᾶν ἀγαθὸν κρίνοντες. For the English translations I follow Long and Sedley [20].
- [4] Diogenes Laertius 10.137: Ἀποδείξει δε χρῆται τοῦ τέλος εἶναι τὴν ἡδονὴν τῷ τὰ ζῶα ἅμα τῷ γεννηθῆναι τῇ μὲν εὐαρεστεῖσθαι, τῷ δὲ πόνῳ προσκρούειν φυσικῶς καὶ χωρὶς λόγου. Αὐτοπαθῶς οὖν φεύγομεν τὴν ἀλγηδόνα.
- [5] Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* 3.194-195: ὅθεν καὶ οἱ Ἐπικούρειοι δεικνύουσι νομίζουσι φύσει αἰρετὴν εἶναι τὴν ἡδονήν· τὰ γὰρ ζῶα φασιν ἅμα τῷ γενέσθαι, ἀδιάστροφα ὄντα, ὁρμᾶν μὲν ἐπὶ τὴν ἡδονήν, ἐκκλίνειν δὲ ἀλγηδόνας.
- [6] Cicero, *De finibus bonorum et malorum* I.30: Omne animal, simul atque natum sit, voluptatem appetere eaque gaudere ut summo bono, dolorem aspernari ut summum malum et, quantum possit, a se repellere, idque facere nondum depravatam ipsa natura incorrupte atque integre iudicante.
- [7] Cicero, *De finibus bonorum et malorum* I.37: Non enim hanc solam sequimur, quae suavitate aliqua naturam ipsam movet et cum iucunditate quadam percipitur sensibus, sed maximam voluptatem illam habemus, quae percipitur omni dolore detracto.
- [8] Diogenes Laertius 10.136: Ο δ' Ἐπίκουρος ἐν τῷ Περὶ αἰρέσεων οὕτω λέγει· “ἡ μὲν γὰρ ἀταραξία καὶ ἀπονία καταστηματαί εἰσιν ἡδοναί· ἡ δὲ χαρὰ καὶ ἡ εὐφροσύνη κατὰ κίνησιν ἐνεργεῖα βλέπονται.
- [9] *Principal Doctrine* 3: “Ὁρος τοῦ μεγέθους τῶν ἡδονῶν ἡ παντὸς τοῦ ἀλγοῦντος ὑπεξαίρεσις.
- [10] *Principal Doctrine* 18: Οὐκ ἐπαύξεται ἐν τῇ σαρκὶ ἡ ἡδονή, ἐπειδὴν ἅπαξ τὸ κατ' ἔνδειαν ἀλγοῦν ἐξαιρεθῇ, ἀλλὰ μόνον ποικίλλεται. τῆς δὲ διανοίας τὸ πέρας τὸ κατὰ τὴν ἡδονὴν ἀπεγένησεν ἡ τε τούτων αὐτῶν ἐκλόγισις καὶ τῶν ὁμογενῶν τούτοις, ὅσα τοὺς μεγίστους φόβους παρεσκεύαζε τῇ διανοίᾳ.
- [11] Moreover, although Freud presented the death drive (Todestrieb) as a universal psychological phenomenon, scholars have noted that it was likely influenced by his personal experiences, particularly the tragedies of World War I and the loss of two of his children, Sophie Freud and Heinerle Halberstadt. Freud's grief over Sophie's death, as well as the loss of Heinerle three years later, likely deepened his sense of life's fragility and the inevitability of death. These personal experiences of loss appear to have played a significant role in shaping Freud's theoretical development of Thanatos, the unconscious drive toward death and self-destruction. [35]

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