

## Lecture Sixteen: Freud and *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*

### Introduction

This week, I want to look at Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. As we will see in the coming weeks, Deleuze's relationship to Freud, even within *Difference and Repetition* itself is ambivalent. We can see this ambivalence as arising from Freud's introduction of two projects which, at least from Deleuze's perspective, are at odds with one another. First, Freud recognises that the phenomenon of repetition cannot be understood purely on the basis of the subject's conscious relation to the world. Like Deleuze, Freud is interested in the conditions that make repetition possible. Freud's account of repression sets up a relation between repetition and representation that mirrors Deleuze's own:

...the patient does not *remember* anything at all of what he has and repressed, but rather *acts it out*. He reproduces it not as a memory, but as an action; he *repeats* it, without of course being aware of the fact that he is repeating it. (RRWT, 36)

The analyst's treatment of a patient involves helping the patient to form a representation of an initially unrepresentable trauma, therefore, which the patient repeats without being able to represent this repetition. The notion of repetition at work in the project of psychoanalysis therefore bears certain structural analogies with that which Deleuze is interested in.

The other side of Freud's project is to provide a scientific (and physical) basis to psychoanalysis. Now, this aim is in tension with Deleuze's philosophy, since Deleuze attempted to show in the introduction to *Difference and Repetition* that it was impossible to formulate a conception of repetition on the basis of scientific law. I want to come back to these themes over the next few weeks. This week, I just want to focus on Freud's own work in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. As we shall see, what Freud is attempting to provide is something like a transcendental account of the conditions of repetition. We can divide the essay into two parts. The first, parts I to III provides an account of the nature of repetition, and shows that we cannot explain the nature of repetition in terms of the obvious principle, the pleasure principle (we repeat because we take pleasure from repeating, or at least, some part of the system of the psyche takes pleasure in repeating). Rather, we need to go beyond this principle in order to explain repetition. This lecture is therefore divided into two primary parts. First, I want to explain the nature of the problem with repetition, before moving on to Freud's account of the source of repetition in the nature of the death drive.

### Repetition and the Pleasure Principle

Before Freud introduces the notion of repetition, he begins with the notion of pleasure. Now, it seems to be a truism that we act in order to maximise our own pleasure (the key assumption, or at least something like it, which we find at the root of utilitarianism). As Freud points out, however, there are a number of cases where it appears to be the case that we in fact act in ways which are guaranteed to lead to unpleasure. In order to begin to explain these cases, we need some kind of definition of what pleasure amounts to. Freud's account of pleasure relates it to

unannexed energy within the psychic apparatus. What does this amount to? Essentially, we can see the psyche as a system subjected to excitations both from inside and outside. Insofar as these excitations threaten the stability of the psyche (traumas and shocks which the mind cannot adequately get to grips with), these excitations are interpreted by consciousness as 'unpleasure'. A relaxation of the psyche, which involves a reduction in energy which hasn't been incorporated into the psychic system, on the contrary, is seen as involving pleasure. The psyche is therefore a homeostatic system which seeks to minimise the amount of energy that could destabilise it. The principle that the psyche attempts to maximise pleasure is therefore tied to a principle of homeostasis, the constancy hypothesis:

[O]ne aspiration of the psychic apparatus is to keep the quantity of excitation present within it at the lowest possible level, or at least to keep it constant. (BPP 47)

Now, it's clearly the case that we do not simply experience pleasure in our lives. The question is, can the experience of unpleasure be brought into accord with the pleasure principle? Most of our experiences of unpleasure can be classified in two ways, the intervention of the reality principle, and the repression of drives:

In the first case, we often have to defer pleasure in order to gain a greater amount of pleasure in the future, that is, the psyche has to take account of reality in order to preserve itself. Unpleasure in this case is simply a consequence of a process which more effectively accords with the pleasure principle.

In the second, it may be the case that a part of the psychic apparatus seeks pleasure at the expense of the psyche as a whole, which can happen particularly in sexual repression. Here, one drive of the psyche is separated off from the others by the ego. When this drive seeks to get rid of an excitation (to experience pleasure), it becomes expressed through 'direct or surrogate gratification' that leads to unpleasure on the part of the ego itself. The pleasure principle is therefore still in operation in this case, overall, and the appearance of unpleasure is a result of the split caused by the ego.

While these cases may explain instances of unpleasure, Freud goes on to argue that in the case of repetition, these explanations are not sufficient. There are four cases of repetition that Freud considers:

The first of these instances is what we might call today post traumatic stress disorder. Soldiers who suffered shocks during the great war had a tendency to relive these experiences in dreams. Now, these shocks are essentially moments where energy is released into the psychic apparatus which cannot be contained by the psyche itself. As shock is experienced as unpleasure, why is it the case that those who have suffered trauma repeat these experiences in contravention of the pleasure principle?

The second is the *fort-da* game. In this example, Freud introduces the case of the child in the habit of throwing a wooden reel into his cot and exclaiming 'o-o-o-o' (which Freud interprets to mean 'fort', or gone), and then pulling it back and exclaiming 'da' (there). The child repeats this action, and derives obvious pleasure from it. How are we to explain it? Well, Freud gives a psychoanalytical reading of it in terms of the mother. In throwing away the reel and then recalling it, the child is re-enacting the departure of the mother, and the child's own ability to abnegate his

drives, in that he is able to deal with her absence without fuss. This explanation gives a good account of the child's pleasure at the mother's return (the 'da' aspect of the game), but cannot explain why the child takes pleasure in both aspects (the mother going away as well). Freud therefore brings in the parallel case of the child taking pleasure in the absence of the father (who was in the military), and the fact that the child has the mother all to himself (the game of 'go in war!'). Now, while in both of these cases, we have somewhat satisfactory explanations of specific repetitions, Freud argues that they point to the fact that there is a general compulsion to repeat in operation in child's play.

The third instance is that encountered in therapy. As neurosis involves making the patient conscious of the unconscious elements that have been repressed by him, it involves bringing to light repressed experiences (bringing them into memory). Freud notes that a repressed experience enters consciousness in two forms. On the one hand, it emerges into memory (it becomes representable), as therapy brings the experience to light. On the other, insofar as it has not been brought into consciousness, it is played out, or repeated by the subject of therapy as if it were a present experience. Now, we can understand why the ego wants to repress the experience, as bringing it to light will lead to unpleasure. The question is, however, what is it that causes the drive to want to express itself through repetition. What is it that compels this drive itself to want to repeat itself?

Finally, we encounter repetition in everyday life regardless of neurosis. People often find themselves repeating the same situations, the same relationships, throughout their lives. In fact, the whole notion of 'character' is grounded in the fact that there is a continuity throughout one's life that expresses itself in the repetition of reactions to the same situations, even when this repetition gets in the way of satisfying the pleasure principle:

We are much more strongly affected by cases where people appear to be the *passive* victim of something which they are powerless to influence, and yet which they suffer again and again in an endless repetition of the same fate. (BPP 60)

What Freud takes from these clinical cases is the fact that as well as the explanations given by the pleasure principle, we also need to give an explanation of a parallel fact, the compulsion to repeat. In order to do so, Freud claims that we have to move beyond the clinical foundation of the pleasure principle itself, and therefore to move to a speculative account of repetition.

### **The Biological Model of the Psyche**

If we are going to explain the principles that operate beyond the pleasure principle, we need to have a better understanding of how the various systems of the psyche interact. Now, pleasure is the perception of a change in the level of excitation of the psyche, and as such is a conscious experience. In order to explain what principles operate prior to the instigation of the pleasure principle, we need to therefore give an account of the genesis of consciousness itself. It follows, Freud refers to the system responsible for perception and consciousness as the *Pcpt-Cs* system, and consciousness in particular as the *Cs*-system. I first want to go through how this system functions normally before looking at Freud's account of its genesis.

What happens when we receive some kind of excitation from the world? Well, obviously, this excitation both needs to be recognised in some way (we need to be conscious that something

has happened), and we also need to store the excitation in some way (we need to incorporate them into memory). Now, Freud's contention is that 'it is not possible within a given system for something both to enter consciousness and also to leave a memory trace.' (BPP 64) The reason for this is that if traces of excitation remained in consciousness, then they would prevent the system from registering new excitations. We therefore need to see the processes of memory and consciousness as operating within two parallel systems. How is it that consciousness develops the role that it does? In order to answer this question, Freud turns to embryology, and the recapitulation theory of evolution (which has since been discredited). The central claim is that the fact that consciousness is located in the cerebral cortex, which is 'at the surface of the brain,' (BPP 63) together with the recapitulation theory of evolution, can allow us to explain how the pleasure principle comes into being.

We can begin with the most primitive form of life, an 'undifferentiated vesicle of irritable matter.' (BPP 65) Now, due to the fact that a part of this organism is turned towards the world, it naturally becomes affected by various stimuli affecting it from the outside world. As it is affected by these various shocks, its nature changes so that it is able to transmit them without its elements changing. This, therefore, is the origin of consciousness. As the system evolves, it develops protection against excessive stimulation from the outside by partially reverting to the inorganic (the skull), and, in higher creatures, by separating off the perceptual aspects further (the development of particular senses). Such a model allows Freud to explain a number of key results of psychoanalysis. It is not simply the case that all stimulation comes from outside the organism. The organism will also suffer disturbances from processes within it. Now, since these processes operate within the organism, the trauma produced by them cannot be reduced by the presence of a barrier, as was the case with shocks from the outside. Traumas which affect the organism from the inside therefore have a far greater role within the economy of the organism than those which affect it from the outside. We can further note that the organism will tend to interpret internal trauma as originating from the outside in order to allow its defences to be brought into play, which leads to the notion of projection.

On this level, we can explain some of the cases of repetition I discussed at the opening of this lecture. I have mentioned that what is shocking in the case of trauma is energy that is unbound operating through the psychic apparatus. We can now note that as well as unbound energy, there is also energy that forms a reservoir that can be used to deal with external threats to the psychic apparatus. Thus we can use energy to cathect, or annex free flowing energy within the psychic system. The example Freud uses is the case of pain. If the barriers of the organism are damaged by some kind of shock, so that they no longer protect it from the influx of stimuli, then the organism can attempt to use its own inner resources to annex this free flowing energy into a state whereby it becomes a part of the psychic system. Pain is therefore a case of this kind, where a stimulus is incorporated into the economy of the psyche, rather than simply being dissipated.

This means that the pleasure principle does not always govern the operations of the psyche. In the case of an extreme threat to the psyche as a whole, the organism may attempt to stabilise the psychic system by suspending the pleasure principle, and instead annexing the free flowing energy into the system of the psyche. Now, this process of annexing energy from the outside can explain some of the situations where it appears as if the pleasure principle has been contravened. In the case of severe trauma, the system experiences unpleasure in order to retain its overall integrity. If we return to the question of war trauma, Freud now claims that such phenomena are a

retrospective attempt to master the phenomena in question, that is, to assert control over it. Now, in the case of war trauma, this attempt to master, and bind energy within the system leads to the repetition of experiences which lead to unpleasure on the part of the subject. Freud therefore claims that such compulsions to repeat simply cannot be understood according to the pleasure principle.

There are therefore two principles operative within the psyche. The first is to increase pleasure within the psychic apparatus by reducing the quantity of energy within it. This is the pleasure principle. The second is a principle that attempts to convert unbound energy into bound energy by mastering excitations. This is the compulsion to repeat, which will become the death drive. Freud's claim is that it is only once excitations have been annexed by the psyche that the pleasure principle can become operative:

This would then mean that it was the task of the higher echelons of the psychic apparatus to annex excitations originating from the drives and reaching it via the primary process. Any failure of this annexion process would bring about a dysfunction analogous to traumatic neurosis. Only when the annexion has taken place would the pleasure principle (or, once the latter has been duly modified, the reality principle) be able to assert its dominion unhindered. In the meantime, however, the psychic apparatus's other task of controlling or annexing the excitation would be very much to the fore – not, it is true, in opposition to the pleasure principle, but independently of it, and to some extent quite heedless of it. (BPP 75)

### **Beyond the Pleasure Principle**

At this stage, it may be worth pondering why we have taken this detour through the sphere of biology in order to essentially repeat a result which was already given within the first, clinical section of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. Well, by grounding the compulsion to repeat in the original structure of the organism, Freud has opened the possibility of analysing this compulsion as a basic function of life itself. In fact, there is touch of sleight of hand at this point in Freud's account, as the compulsion to repeat is understood as a compulsion to return. While the compulsion to repeat can operate in accordance with the libido, it can also operate as a tendency of life to return to an earlier stage.

Freud characterises this tendency to return in the following terms:

At this point we cannot help thinking that we have managed to identify a universal attribute of drives – and perhaps of *all* organic life – that has not hitherto been clearly recognized, or at any rate not explicitly emphasized. A drive might accordingly be seen as *a powerful tendency inherent in every living organism to restore a prior state*, which prior state the organism was compelled to relinquish due to the disruptive influence of external forces; we can see it as a kind of organic elasticity, or, if we prefer, as a manifestation of inertia in organic life. (BPP 76)

What leads Freud to this conclusion? Central to this conception are, I think, two primary assumptions in the account we have been looking at so far. The first is that the organism is defined essentially as closed off from the world. Organic life's engagement with the world is seen as essentially traumatic and disruptive for Freud. Second, there is the belief that organisms, in their particular development, tend to repeat their development as a species. If we combine these two

assumptions, then we have the claim that change (and hence, development) is traumatic, and therefore generates a move for the organism to return to a prior, less traumatic state. Now, Freud claims that this movement can be seen in the fact that fish, when spawning, return not simply to their own birthplace, but also 'to the previous domain of their species, which, in the course of time, they have exchanged for others.' (BPP 77) Here the second claim, the recapitulation theory of embryo development, comes into play, as each animal carries with it the history of its development from the simplest forms of life. In fact, this movement is not simply to the earliest forms of life, but to the origin of life itself as the move from the inorganic to the organic. Thus, the drive to repeat is not simply a drive to return to an earlier form of life, but in fact, a death drive. In this sense, the compulsion to repeat/return and the death drive are equivalent:

*The goal of all life is death, or to express it retroactively: the inanimate existed before the animate.* (BPP 78)

## Conclusion

Freud's account of the origin of repetition therefore ultimately traces it back to the constitution of consciousness itself, therefore. Life can be seen as playing out the relations between two different drives. First, there is the libido, which aims at conserving life by protecting the organism from external traumas that threaten to destabilise it. This conservation of life is ultimately to be understood as simply making more complex the more fundamental drive, the death drive, which seeks to return the organism to its primal state. I want to relate this to Deleuze's criticisms of Freud next week, but for now, we can note a number of key features of this account:

The first is that the death of an organism is not (necessarily) something that is due to external factors, but rather something that is inherent to the organism itself. The organism seeks to return to the inanimate. The obvious question to ask about this claim is, why is it the case that life therefore exists at all if it seeks its own dissolution? Well, death is at first 'still easy for living matter; the course of life that had to be gone through was probably short, its direction determined by the newly created organism's chemical structure.' (BPP 78-9) Over time, however, the complexity of life means that more and more detours are incorporated between life and death. These drives delay the movement towards death, and so appear to be conservative. They are the 'guardians of life' in that they allow the organism to perpetuate itself, but in the end, these drives, such as the sexual drives, are ultimately subordinated to the death drive. They are determined by the fact that the organism wants to choose its own death, rather than succumb to external influences.

Second, the account of the organism that Freud has developed is essentially conservative. We can note, for instance, that life does not itself develop into more complex forms, but only increases in complexity under the influence of external circumstances, which mould the organism by chance. Life is essentially passive, therefore:

[!]t must be the developmental history of our planet and its relationship to the sun that has left its imprint for us to behold in the development of organisms. The conservative organic drives have assimilated every one of these externally imposed modifications of the

organism's life-cycle and duly preserved them in order to repeat them, and therefore inevitably give the misleading impression of being forces bent on change and progress, whereas they merely seek to achieve an old goal by new means as well as old. (BPP 78)

Third, from the very beginning of Freud's account, we are dealing with an isolated organism. Freud's account essentially sees life as closed off from the world. The key transition, in which the organism emerges from the inorganic, is therefore something of which we are 'quite incapable of imagining.' (BPP 78) This is quite different from the kind of account we find in Deleuze, where the organism is only provisionally isolated from the world, as a set of 'relations of motion and rest, of speeds and slownesses between particles.' (SPP 123)

Finally, in spite of these differences, what Freud essentially has given us is a transcendental account of the conditions of repetition, where they are traced back to an operation outside of consciousness itself. In this regard, we can see that Deleuze's relationship to the Freudian enterprise is going to be essentially one of ambivalence, rejecting the organicism, whilst accepting the notion of a transcendental and non-representational ground to repetition.