

Freud's concept of "Trieb". A psychoanalytical account of its antinomic nature

Sinatora, F.¹; Mezzalira, S.²

Abstract

According to Freud, the drive (*Trieb*) is a borderline concept located between the psychic and the somatic. A circular account of Freud's conceptualization of *Trieb* is provided, along with a dialectical hermeneutics of the dual aspectivity that characterizes Freud's concept of *Eros* and *Thanatos* as thrusts towards the somatic discharge and psychic representability. As such, the understanding of *Trieb* cannot escape from an internal antinomy, which involves tautological and contradictory modes of being manifested in human experience. Therefore, we argue that *Eros* destroys life, whereas *Thanatos* contributes to making life possible. Ultimately, Freud's concept of drive seems crucial to a deep understanding of the psyche itself, which is always embedded in worldly relations that are in-formed by its core intentionality.

Keywords: *Drive; Trieb; Freud; Eros; Thanatos*

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¹ University of Padova, Italy

² University of Calabria, Italy

Corresponding author: Selene Mezzalira, selene.mezzalira@unical.it

Introduction

As intentional beings, we are always directed-towards, ongoingly extended in the attempt to physically or psychically reach or grasp something. This “being-towards” that characterizes human nature is the central topic of this paper. Our analysis is intended to provide the building blocks to propose an account of Freud’s concept of drive (*Trieb*), regarded as the foundation of the movement of “being-towards” the world and its relations. On the one hand, human drives represent the tendency to a stimulus discharge, which ends up falling outside and beyond the boundaries of the body. On the other hand, the drive is the first element for the psyche, the grain of sand on which the pearl of psychism is layered. When examining the original features of *Trieb*, it seems that its nature contains a “dual aspectivity.”¹ As we will articulate, precisely because it is a borderline concept, Freud’s conceptualization of *Trieb* cannot escape from an internal antinomy, namely, a tautological and contradictory mode of being manifested in human experience. In the history of psychoanalysis, the problem has been dealt with by trying to give primacy either to the tendency for life preservation, or to the restoration of a stimulus-free condition. In other words, drives have been associated either to the urge towards mere discharge, or to the tendency towards representability and mentalization.

Human beings are “self-interpreting animals” (Taylor, 1985). They always engage in interpretation processes aimed at making meaning out of experience (Sandage et al.,

2008). As a “reflective metapraxis,” Gadamer’s (1960) hermeneutics, which built back on Dilthey’s (1894/1927) descriptive and analytic psychology, is generally recognized to be of paramount importance to interpret human experience. It has been suggested to be crucial for psychotherapy (e.g., Martin, & Sugarman, 2001), and in the educational formation (*Bildung*) of mental health professionals as well (McWhorter, 2021). More specifically, this method of interpretation is associated with an open and receptive attitude, in which self-awareness is supposed to take into account the mutual intertwining between the interpreter and the observed phenomenon, resulting in a greater capability for self-reflection, empathic understanding, and monitoring of countertransference. In this sense, our aim is intended to provide a circular hermeneutics of Freud’s conceptualization of *Trieb*, which mirrors its internal dialectic, whereby it reveals itself as tautological and contradictory in its very essence. The drive is indeed characterized by a circular causality that is associated with its essentially dialectical nature. Through our analysis of Freud’s definition of *Trieb*, we provide a psychoanalytical account of how the core features of human psychism are bound to different orders of paradoxes that require a dialectical explication.

A methodological premise

The psyche can be understood as the weave of meanings we bestow on events, as these are nested and knotted around affects

¹ T. Fuchs (2018) used this expression to refer to the polarity between mind and body within an embodied, embedded, extended, and enactive view of their intertwined system.

and representations. The latter, as Freud wanted, can be regarded as cathexes of mnemonic traces derived from sensory perception. In fact, internal and external affections are both original and co-participating in the creation of psychic reality. Far from appearing as a clear, splitting barrier, the boundary between external and internal reality rather resembles a permeable “skin” (Anzieu, 1985) that allows for a constant interchange between intrapsychic and worldly relations. As a result, a scientific account of human nature must primarily take into account its actual embodiment and embeddedness in a world that is from the very beginning open to the possibility of being touched.

Our epistemological stance moves from the conviction that the “way in which” we know constitutionally impacts “what” we know. The fate of our inquiry depends on the results of the search for the boundaries within which our thinking is possible.² The tendency towards the constitution of a unified Self is only potentially active at birth, and requires a good-enough system of care to be implemented within the individual’s experience of the Self, others, and the world. In fact, the role of experience in the infant’s development might be referred to as something that is *known, but not thought of* (Bollas, 1987).³ The meaning of human existence is primarily related to the possibility of having a coherent and well-organized experience in space and time. In the early stages of development, the infant’s experience is supported by the maternal environment of care, which crucially contributes to the formation of the Self.

² Whereas Kant (1781/1787), as the founder of transcendental philosophy, identified these boundaries with the pure forms of a mature-enough thinking subjectivity, we want to turn our attention to the first development of the individual at the early stages of life.

If the Greek word ἀνάλυσις (*analysis*) clearly indicates a process of de-composition, concerning what presents itself in a unified but also hidden, concealed form, then the unconscious mind can be regarded as *the decay to which analysis must place a privation from its original concealment*. The ultimate meaning of (psycho)analysis might be thought of referring to the words that Heidegger (1927) entrusted to his *Being and time*, when he stated that existential analysis is always associated with *violence*, meaning the “tearing away” of a hidden truth, ἀλήθεια (*aletheia*), *to which the subject feels a denied belonging*. By means of a process of de-composition of psychic processes, psychoanalysis identifies and isolates the unconnected elements of the psyche, provided that the system itself can perform a “synthesis” of these same elements as deeply intertwined. As opposed to “analysis,” the definition of ψυχή (*psyché*) raises profound difficulties, as the term refers to *both* the process *and* its object, which is in turn the subject of the process of de-composition. There is no way of knowing the content of such a signifier, since its meaning overflows outside its boundaries, and – like the river water represented in Egon Schiele’s *The Mill* – it also *splits and breaks*. We are here faced with a case in which our thinking twists on itself while trying to know itself, so that “the human mind enters as object and subject into the scientific process of psychology” (Heisenberg, 1958, p. 63). As a result, the only way out seems to consist of delimiting the modes of human thinking, identifying the boundaries

³ Conversely, we might argue that Kant’s *a priori* forms of subjectivity might constitute something that is *thought of, but not known*, given that the pure forms of knowledge cannot be known for what they are in themselves.

within which it is possible for us *to think and be our thinking*.

Freud (1938) identified the boundaries of the psychoanalytic inquiry in the *limen* between the organic scenario of the mind (i.e., the brain or nervous system), and the immediacy of our acts of consciousness. The nature of this relationship seems so obscure the fact that “everything that lies between is unknown to us, and the data do not include any direct relation between these two terminal points of our knowledge” (Freud, 1938, p. 144). Far from repositing a Cartesian split between a *res cogitans* and a *res extensa*, this actually shows a transition from a physiological to a psychic organization in the sense of a *chromatic passage* from one hue to another, whereby the colors, in their continuum, always fail to assume a clearly identifiable degree of form. Psychoanalysis precisely intends to search for the nature of the psyche in this chromatic passage of colors. Through the blurring of the chromatic dimensions, the psyche binds and identifies the differences between the states of information of subjectivity. In this sense, Freud’s idea of the embodied nature of the psyche cannot be traced back to a biological or psychological reductionism. Based on the understanding of the border lines that stand between the psychic realm of thoughts and the somatic domain of sensations, we aim at identifying those elements without which there would be neither a thought nor a thinking subjectivity.

Freud’s concept of drive does not refer to a mere somatic excitement, but to the *psy-*

chic translation of such an excitement (Mangini, 2001). The inquiry around Freud’s *Trieb*, as the borderline concept that stands between the psychic and the somatic, seems therefore crucial to a deep understanding of the psyche itself, as the latter is always embedded in object relations towards which it is constantly moving. In this sense, drives represent the core manifestations of a psychism regarded as “an epigenetic expression of biological organization” (Kaywin, 1960, p. 629).

The vicissitudes of “Trieb”

The concept of *Trieb*⁴ is one of the most obscure notions that psychoanalysis retains in its theoretical baggage, precisely because it is, as it were, a “mythological” entity (Freud, 1932). However, as Lampl-De Groot (1956) argued, provided that science has to suppose the existence of constructive (unifying) and destructive (dissolving) forces, and that these forces (or “tendencies”) ground the psychic determinants of aggressive and destructive acts, Freud’s theory of drives is no more “mystical” than any other scientific hypothesis. From a biological perspective, *Trieb* appears “as a concept *on the frontier between the mental and the somatic*, as the *psychical representative* of the stimuli originating from within the organism and reaching the mind, as a measure of the demand made upon the mind for work in consequence of its connection with the body” (Freud, 1915a, pp. 121-122, italics added). In order for a scientific account of drives not to become a phantasmatic eluc-

⁴ Of note, even though Freud’s use of the term *Trieb* (i.e., drive) was aimed at marking an essential difference from the biological term *Instinkt* (i.e., instinct), it seems that “Freud’s translators did not deem it important to make an analogous

distinction” (Hartmann, 1948, p. 378). The core difference between instincts and drives points to the very scope of psychoanalysis, namely, the aim of understanding the experience of pleasure rather than the nature of need (Pratt, 1958).

bration, it is necessary to draw out these mythological elements as the original manifestations of the core features of subjectivity.

As the *incipit* of his major writings on drives, Freud (1905, 1915a, 1920) stated that the question is shrouded in darkness, and is not reducible to rigid definitions. The unitary aspect of drives is hard to grasp, as they are always constrained within their dual aspectivity, first between sexual and conservation aspects, then between life and death drives. In Freud's works, the concept of *Trieb* appears for the first time in the *Three essays on the theory of sexuality* (1905), where it refers to the excess of unbearable stimuli that must find a way of resolution through motility and action. Yet Freud constantly rearranged his theoretical positions around this issue.⁵ For instance, whereas in *Instincts and their vicissitudes* (Freud, 1915) external and internal stimuli are still separated from each other, in *Beyond the pleasure principle* (Freud, 1920) this polarity undergoes a dizzying change in the definition of *Trieb*, which turns out to be "an urge inherent in organic life to restore an earlier state of things which the living entity has been obliged to abandon under the pressure of external disturbing forces" (p. 36). This definition amounts to a presentation of a new hypothesis on the dual aspectivity of *Trieb*, whereby Eros and the death drive represent the new antinomy.

The term *Trieb* stems from the middle high German "*trīp*," which derives from "*trīben*" and refers to some kind of "thrust." The concept of thrust characterizes the nature of all psychic mechanisms: from a dynamic point of view, these can be described as the result of the interactions between differ-

ent forces, whose main representative is the *libido*. "Energy generates *forces*, and forces are manifested as *drives*, which appear in psychic life through their *ideational representatives*, to which an affect is connected" (Petrella, 1988, p. 115). Freud's drive theory developed out of Goethe's notion of "mobility" and Helmholtz's concept of *Triebkraft* (Vermorel, 1990). Even though the concept of "instinct" has been suggested to be eradicated from psychoanalysis (Frank, 2003), it must be noted that Freud never used this term to characterize human motivation, but argued that the latter is overdetermined, since it evolves from unconscious, body-related psychic processes. As opposed to instincts, which own a pre-determined object, drives (*Triebe*) do not have any pre-given object (Van Haute, 2017). Freud's term "sexual drive" has been suggested to represent a "mystified expression of the unconscious" (Zepf & Seel, 2016). Also, Freud's drive theory has been thought of as an account that can explain all facets of intrapsychic and intersubjective phenomena, from the individual's fundamental urges to the most sublime domains of the cultural world (Mills, 2004). Therefore, the difference between drives and instincts is paramount to consider when evaluating Freud's works on the topic (Conrad, 2021).

According to Freud (1915a), the "main characteristic" and "essential nature" of drives consists in "their origin in sources of stimulation within the organism and their appearance as a constant force," so that "no actions of flight avail against them" (p. 119). Since drives are mainly thrusts towards an indeterminate (but still always determinable) object, the latter remains here unthematized. Freud's usage of the term *Triebchicksalen* (i.e., "fates

⁵ For a more extended, chronological survey of Freud's theory of drives, see Bibring (1941).

of drives”) precisely points to the variation of *Trieb* in its course. In this sense, the “most essential” character of *Trieb* immediately refers to a fundamental lack that affects the biological organism. If the drive, as a biological element, falls outside the boundaries of the organism, that is intended to discharge a quantum of energy that exceeds it, as a psychological element it rather serves to the psychic functioning and organization of mental reality. The confusion around the concept of drive stems perhaps from this dual aspectivity. As a construct on the borderline between the psychic order of human thinking on the one hand, and the somatic domain of the body on the other, the drive cannot but be double-faced in itself.

While embracing the so-called hypothesis of the biological intentionality of the psyche, probably derived from Franz Brentano (Shmidt, 2017), Freud (1915a) ascribed a finalistic aspect to the psychic system: “the nervous system is an apparatus which has the function of getting rid of the stimuli that reach it, or of reducing them to the lowest possible level; or which, if it were feasible, would maintain itself in an altogether unstimulated condition” (p. 120). Whether stimuli are external or internal, the body always appears as an *affection*, and – once active – in the *scenario* represented by the nervous system, drives make the principle of constancy emerge from the principle of Nirvana (Freud, 1920).

Discharge and representability. “Trieb” as intentionality

Now, one of the core features that characterize and differentiate the organic, living being from the inorganic matter is the property of *intentionality*, which “consists of the capacity that an organism has to modify itself and

the environment in a relationship of mutual integration [...] intentionality is essentially this transporting the self into the environment and the environment into itself” (Chiereghin, 2004, pp. 110-116). Freud’s concept of *Trieb*, in this sense, is characterized both as a drive to action, and as a tension towards a modification of a state of urgency. The drive is thrust, “openness-towards” an environment in which what satisfies the need, once adequately modified, is offered in its availability. “Openness” refers here to the condition of possibility of the ontological relationship between subject and object.

An entity present-at-hand within the world can be touched by another entity only if by its very nature the latter entity has Being-in as its own kind of Being – only if, with its Being-there (*Da-sein*), something like the world is already revealed to it, so that from out of that world another entity can manifest itself in touching, and thus become accessible in its Being-present-at-hand. (Heidegger, 1927, p. 81)

Far from being isolated forces, drives can only be understood if placed within the whole structure of psychic functioning. As Hartmann (1948) stated, if it is certainly true that the latter can only be understood by considering the crucial role played by drives, the reverse is also valid, that is, “we cannot really understand the functions of these drives without looking at their position in the framework of the psychic structure” (p. 379). Whereas for the biological order the purpose is merely *discharge* – and consequently stillness –, for the psyche it consists in *representability* – and therefore meaning (i.e., significance). If the drive is an essential thrust for psychic func-

tioning, then human beings search for the object that can fill their state of lack, as a way to repair the original, narcissistic wound.

The psychoanalytical attempts to create a conceptual synthesis of what can be observed at the biological level of the organism and at the psychic domain of our mind have historically generated core dilemmas. In addition to the characterization of *Trieb* as an internal stimulus and force that stands behind the fundamental needs, what emerges in Freud's thinking is that the psyche lingers in the constant transit of stimuli – be they drives (internal) or physiological (external). As opposed to outer stimulation, however, the drive “never operates as a force giving a *momentary* impact but always as a *constant* one” (Freud, 1915a, p. 114). The drive is thus characterized as: 1) an internal stimulus that “does not arise from the external world but from within the organism itself” (Freud, 1915a, p. 118); 2) a thrust (*Drang*) that emerges from the organism as its source (*Quelle*), and drives towards the fulfillment of a state of internal tension as its goal (*Ziel*) through the use of an object (*Objekt*); 3) a request of the body to the psyche for the elaboration of a quantum of energy. Freud's (1915a) analysis of *Trieb* sheds light on

the subjection of the instinctual impulses to the influences of the three great polarities that dominate mental life. Of these three polarities we might describe that of activity–passivity as the biological, that of ego–external world as the real, and finally that of pleasure–unpleasure as the economic polarity. (Freud, 1915a, p. 132)⁶

⁶ Of note, this original opening of *Trieb* to the perceptual world is also given within the love-hate dialectic, which Freud addressed when discussing the two species of drives in *The ego and the id* (1923).

The three polarities indicated by Freud form a hierarchical order, because the relationships “activity versus passivity” and “pleasure versus displeasure” are always bound to the relationship between the ego and the external world. What does it mean that “the ego-subject is passive in respect of external stimuli but active through its own [drives]” (Freud, 1915a, p. 134)? The drive is born of the flesh, and is always present in any affection of the body. Therefore, the body is essentially *affection*. Every time the external world imprints, perturbs, affects the living being, then a need, and therefore a drive, is born to reality.

The nonsense of “Trieb.” Tautology and contradiction

According to Freud (1920), the drive as a thrust tends to restore an anterior state that was perturbed by external forces. If this is true, does the drive tend to re-present something identical? This repetition of the sameness⁷ seems indeed the expression of a limit, which is presented in a tautological form. It might surely be that this sort of “attractor,” which always pushes towards the same state of things, might explain the nature of the death drive (*Thanatos*). Yet the life drive (*Eros*) also tends to incessantly make a specific state present, and is also presented in a tautological form, as what it re-presents is precisely the phenomenon of life. In this sense, *it is the life drive itself that presents death to the living organism*, because in its tension to re-present – actualizing it – the same state of life, it burns

⁷ Of note, Ferenczi's (1924) view of the repetition compulsion was aimed at bringing the psychological and biological features of drives together (Penrose, 1931).

life itself, thus showing its contradictory nature. Just like *Eros* appears, in its description, contradictory and tautological, *Thanatos* does not escape from this antinomy either. In its pushing back towards the condition of inorganic peace, it brings the living organism into the optimal condition for being perturbed, thus rendering it capable of receiving new stimuli. This self-limiting dual aspectivity, while constituting a “tempered zone” (Chiereghin, 2004, p. 21) for the emergence of psychic patterns of activity, also indicates how the death drive is a vehicle for the preservation of the potentiality for the actualization of life.

Trieb therefore appears as a *nonsense*. On the one hand, the movement of re-actualizing life, complicating it and seeking ever more differentiated states, leads to the wear and tear of the living organism’s *potentia*. On the other hand, in order for life to be actualized, there must be an opposed movement, which unties and allows the system to be capable of binding again. The problem in this sense is an *economic* one (Gaddini, 1972), because it concerns drives as “energetic requests” to the psyche. In order to allow for a transition from a somatic to a psychic organization, human drives need to create that optimal zone in which the birth of the psyche is possible. Indeed, the concept of *Trieb* takes shape in the antinomy between *Eros* and *Thanatos*, in such a way that when “the monotony of identity and the cacophony of absolute diversity fight each other, and when the contrast is the mutual limitation, the polyphony of sensible experience can arise from it” (Chiereghin, 2004, p. 26).

After all, the idea that in the psychic system there is a drive both to bind and to unbind at the same time was already presented by Freud (1920), when he stated,

we find it hard to believe, however, that permanent traces of excitation such as these are also left in the system *Pcpt.-Cs.* [*Perception-Consciousness*]. If they remained constantly conscious, they would very soon set limits to the system’s aptitude for receiving fresh excitations. If, on the other hand, they were unconscious, we should be faced with the problem of explaining the existence of unconscious processes in a system whose functioning was otherwise accompanied by the phenomenon of consciousness. (p. 25)

Just like a *mystic writing pad* (Freud, 1924), the psychic system receives the stimuli and, at the same time, needs to erase these same impressions in order to be open to new affections. Therefore, the dual aspectivity of *Eros* and *Thanatos*, which appear tautological in their aims and contradictory in their attainments, traces the boundaries that ground the possibility for the psyche as such. A rather counterintuitive account of the dual nature of the drive emerges, whereby *it is Eros that destroys life, whereas the death drive pushes towards the actualization of life*, since it tends to re-present the state in which the psychic system becomes capable of being perturbed.

We have seen how the drive is essentially thrust, since *it is finalistically directed to the preservation of a fundamentally unpreservable state*. Once life has taken root, it is only through winding and complex paths that the organism can go back to the inorganic state of stillness. The return to a state devoid of life is the fundamental principle of the death drive, and precisely represents the inorganic state that precedes the organic stage (Freud, 1938). The living being finds itself in a state of perpetual lack, of which the movement of “being-towards” is a crucial feature. Therefore, the organism lingers in the potentiality of actualizing the satisfaction of this lack of life. The inorganic domain, once introduced

into life, in order to reach the inorganic state again will need to tend to the actualization of life. In this sense, “life is not preservation, but actualization of itself” (Barbaras, 2004, p. 71). In other words, *the living organism does not struggle to actualize life in order to preserve it, but because it owes it* (Chiereghin, 2004).

Once the vital circuit has been triggered, the inorganic aim can only be attained through the actualization of the potentiality of life, to which inorganic matter is in debt, and which – in such actualization – is progressively worn down in its potentiality. *Life is possible only by virtue of the work of a perturbative environment*. In this sense, the relationship between the living organism and its environment does not merely consist in a “being-within.” In fact, the constitutive and foundational aspect of the relationship itself grounds the living organism by virtue of its intertwining with the environment, so as to resonate with the latter in its most proper *être-au-monde* (Merleau-Ponty, 1945). Therefore, the drive is characterized in all its complexity, paradox, contradiction, and tautology precisely through the struggle for life not as the preservation of something that the living possesses *sic et simpliciter*, but as a fundamental attempt to create a difference and escape from annihilation. The drive itself bears this fundamental characteristic in its erotic and deadly declination, meaning that *the affirmation of life passes through its negation*.

The sense of “Trieb” and its dialectic movement

The drive is impossible to observe *from all points of view at the same time*, as it appears embedded in an apparently irreducible duality. *Trieb* expresses the bridge between the somatic dimension of the body and the

psychic domain of thought, and, as such, it will only yield to the point of view owned by who intends to describe it. On the one hand, the somatic tendency refers to an outward-looking functioning, whose aim is to discharge a quantum of energy; on the other hand, it presents, for the psyche, a tendency that brings the organism into the optimal condition for being affected. This is the dual aspectivity of the *death drive (Thanatos)*. On the one hand, the psychic tendency points to a limit all stretched inside in seeking a synthesis of affective-representative processes in order to actualize the phenomenon of life; on the other hand, it presents the wear and tear of energy. This is the dual aspectivity of the *life drive (Eros)*.

According to Freud (1915b), the psyche seems to move “in two opposite directions: either it starts from the instincts and passes through the system *Ucs.* [*Unconscious*] to conscious thought-activity; or, beginning with an instigation from outside, it passes through the system *Cs.* [*Consciousness*] and *Pcs.* [*Pre-consciousness*] till it reaches the *Ucs.* cathexes of the ego and objects” (p. 204). These two directions draw a *hermeneutic circularity*, where the body features as *affection* of stimulations, and the drive as openness. Therefore, the psyche is delineated as a structure capable of actively receiving stimuli, that is, as an *active receptivity* (Chiereghin, 2004). Ultimately, because of its location between the psychic and the somatic, *the drive cannot escape from the nonsense of the border lines of human knowledge*.

If the drive, tending only to discharge the stimuli, aimed only at the suppression of a state of tension, it would never become a bridge – or a starting point – for the psyche. To think of the drive as the sign of a lack that

needs to be fulfilled (i.e., life, to which the organism is in debt) means to describe *Trieb* as maintaining an intentional relation with something other than itself. In this sense, we might argue that the drive represents a form of *intentionality*, because it allows a two-way movement between the Self and the world – and vice versa. It is the very tendency to the stimulus discharge that opens up the living organism to the receptivity that characterizes human sensibility. It is in this sense that *the drive draws a circular path*, since it owns *a somatic nature and a psychic tendency*. As it is not originally connected to any actual object – in other words, as it primarily aims at discharge – the drive opens the body up to the reception of objects potentially suitable for its satisfaction. This “moving-towards” is delineated as a type of “waiting” for a stimulus to become present through the perceptual apparatus. The drive is not only the vehicle for the actualization of life. It is also what forms the relationship between the body and the psyche: “no constitution of the subject can recover a sense without the experience of the object, but especially without this experience being informed by the drive (through its ‘psychic representative’) as a basic affective indicator (pleasure/displeasure)” (Racalbuto, 2003, p. 616).

Whereas at the somatic level the drive is declined as a mere discharge, it also leads, at the same time, to the opening to outer stimuli and to their psychic perception. In other words, *the drive has the task of informing the psychic system of the affective state of the body*. It then appears as an indicator of a work that the psyche needs to perform to preserve the body as *affection*. Just like the subatomic particle that is subject to the descriptive duality wave-corpuscle, the drive cannot be simultaneously observable in the form of drive to-

wards discharge *and* drive towards representability. The drive underlies the body-mind polarity, overcoming it at the same time by bridging these two modes of organization of the life dynamics. The gap consists of the nonsense of drives, whereby the contradiction of the death drive opens the body to new stimulations, whereas the paradox of the life drive consists of actualizing the power of life by consuming it. The solution of the antinomy is therefore hidden in the *in-formative leap* of life itself, in its different modes of organization: “we must not oppose the order of perception to that of the drive [...] This move becomes feasible, and plausible, if life is conceived as constitution and openness, and not as execution of tasks prefixed in an instinctual way and as conservation” (Vanzago, 2004, p. 50). If the drive were mere positivity, it would enclose the living being within disinhibiting blind reactions. However, the negativity of the drive opens the living to the world of stimuli, which are sought for their peculiar qualities without being originally linked to it.

Limitations and recommendations for future research

It is our idea that, far from representing an obsolete adherence to an outdated doctrine, Freud’s conceptualization of drive still remains an essential element for psychoanalytic theory to be aware of its very foundation and to take on the ethical task of drawing the transformations of its foundational roots. The delimitation of the boundaries of knowledge is such that what renders it possible is a set of subjective forms that also define the obscurity of what stands outside these very border lines. However, even though Freud was incessantly driven towards the willingness to exhaustively

define the concept of *Trieb* from a metapsychological point of view, he also left areas of shadow and ambiguity around it. What we tried to clarify is a specific epistemological aspect of the dual aspectivity, whose form characterizes the drive in its paradoxical manifestations. Our hope is that future research will move from the hermeneutics we explicated here, whereby contradiction and tautology are both embraced within a dialectical movement, which characterizes the nature of *Trieb* together with other relevant psychoanalytic notions that we have left at the margins (e.g., need, desire, longing, etc.).

Concluding remarks

Ultimately, if the constitution of the object of knowledge is the result of an internal elaboration that moves from affection, then the *Trieb* opens to the same perceptual process from which, in turn, the representative process also begins. Therefore, it is a matter of understanding life “in terms of constitution, that is, of regarding every living being as a process of self-constitution that depends on a whole from which, however, at the very moment in which it underlies it, it separates itself from it, individualizing itself” (Vanzago, 2004, p. 52) – a formal function that attracts the drive dimension towards a synthesis that, at the moment in which it unifies, it nonetheless individualizes and separates. “Therefore, strictly speaking, *the fulfillment of the living would be its negation*, that is, its non-differentiation from the physical-chemical universe” (Barbaras, 2004, p. 70, italics added). The cognitive dimension of perceptual knowledge cannot be separated from the emotional domain of affects. According to Freud (1923, p. 40), *perceptions have for the ego the same signifi-*

cance as drives have for the id. In this perspective, as an instance that presides over the perceptive-sensorial apparatus, the ego is shaped through the forms of assimilation of the environment.

It is through the drive that the ego opens the system *P-C* (*Perception-Consciousness*) to sensory stimuli: “perception is not a purely passive process. The ego periodically sends out small amounts of cathexis into the perceptual system, by means of which it samples the external stimuli, and then after every such tentative advance it draws back again” (Freud, 1925, p. 238). Thus, object perception is influenced by the constitution of an ego that is formed through the qualities of its object relations, which always move from core bodily affections. More specifically, human thinking is only possible through a representative doubling of perception, whereby the “first” perception always appears to be traumatic, until a re-presentation comes to the forefront and provides it with symbolic means (Mangini, 2015). The capacity to think stems from the absent object, that is, the psyche becomes able to think of the object “by reproducing it as a representation without the external object having still to be there” (Freud, 1925, p. 237).

Ultimately, the drive is itself *circular*, since it makes object perception possible by means of an opening of the senses onto the world, while also, at the same time, informing the psyche of the nature of such stimulation. Therefore, the two concepts of *Eros* and *Thanatos* appear to be theoretically complementary, thus pointing to a creation of a dialectical relationship whereby each pole is necessary to the other one (Kli, 2018). Stimuli are assimilated and informed through the structural forms of subjectivity, which are the very condition of possibility of human experience. *Human subjectivity in-forms objects and is in-*

formed by the nature of the relationship with them, in a process that can be interpreted through a hermeneutic circularity. While trying to resolve the antinomy of Trieb, we argued that the living being does not originally possess life in itself. On the contrary, by evolving from nonorganized matter, it tends to actualize life while still being in debt to it. This position is confirmed by the analysis of Eros and Thanatos as contradictory and tautological borderline concepts, which are nonetheless dialectically intertwined and can be accounted for by a circular hermeneutics.

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