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Introduction to the Russian translation of Freud's *Beyond the pleasure principle*

Lev Vygotsky and Alexander Luria

I

Among the great minds of our times, Freud's was probably one of the most intrepid. A quality such as this was always considered to be a virtue more suited to a practical man than to a scholar and thinker. Courage is needed for a man of action, but it seems that an infinitely greater amount of daring is required for thinking. At every turn, scholarship is populated by so many indeterminate minds, timid thoughts and spineless hypotheses that it almost seems as if wariness and following in other people's footsteps have become obligatory attributes of official academic work.

Freud made his debut as a revolutionary. The degree of opposition which psychoanalysis elicited in official academic circles, bears incontestable witness to the fact that it was guilty of having severely infringed age old traditions of bourgeois morality and scholarship and had overstepped the limits of what is acceptable. This new scientific idea and its creators were forced to spend many years in dismal isolation. The most virulent hostility and open resistance rose up against the new science at all levels of society. Freud himself says, that he 'was one of those who have "disturbed the sleep of the world", as Hebbel says'.¹ And this is exactly what did happen.

The uproar surrounding the new sciences gradually subsided. Nowadays, any new work in the field of psychoanalysis no longer elicits such a hostile reception. If not entirely, then at least partially, the former harassment has been replaced by general acceptance of the new discipline in an atmosphere of intense interest, profound regard and strong curiosity which even its principal opponents cannot deny it. Psychoanalysis has long ceased to be just a technique used in psychotherapy – it has grown to include a number of general basic problems in general psychology, biology, history of culture and all so-called 'Geisteswissenschaften'.

Particularly here in Russia, Freudian psychology is very popular, not only in learned circles, but also among the general reading public. During the past few years almost all of Freud's works have been translated into Russian and published. In front

of our eyes, a new and original trend in psychoanalysis is beginning to form in Russia, which, with the help of the theory of the conditional reflexes, attempts to synthesize Freudian psychology and Marxism and to develop a system of 'reflexological Freudian psychology' in the spirit of dialectical materialism. Such a translation of Freud into Pavlov's language is an objective attempt to decode the dark 'depth psychology', and is a living proof of the great vitality of this theory and its inexhaustible research potential.

But for Freud, with the recognition of his work, the 'heroic age' did not merely become a thing of the past, but it required infinitely greater courage and even greater heroism than before. Whereas earlier he had been consigned to his own 'splendid isolation' and had arranged his life 'like Robinson Crusoe on a desert island', now he was faced with new and serious threats such as misrepresentations of the basic tenets of the new theory and the need for the scientific truth to conform to the exigencies and tastes of the bourgeois world view. In a word, earlier the threat came from the enemy side, now it came from the allies. And indeed, many of the leading lights, who 'have found their stay in the underworld of psycho-analysis too uncomfortable for their taste', abandoned it.²

This internal struggle required a much greater effort than confrontation with enemies. Freud's fundamental idiosyncrasy lies in the fact that he is bold enough to take every idea to its logical and final conclusion. He did not always manage to take others along with him on this difficult and frightening journey and many abandoned him immediately after the starting point and turned off the road. This maximalist thinking process resulted in Freud remaining essentially isolated as a scholar even at the very peak in the rise of scientific interest in psychoanalysis.

The present translation of the book *Jenseits des Lustprinzips* (1920) which is being offered to the reader, belongs to a number of just such lonely works by Freud. Even orthodox psychoanalysts sometimes pass over this work in silence; as far as a wider circle of readers is concerned, both abroad and in Russia, one keeps coming up against definite prejudice which must be clarified and dispelled.

This book reaches such astounding and unexpected conclusions that, at first glance, they appear to contradict sharply everything which we all have become accustomed to consider to be irrefutable scientific truth. And what is more, it contradicts some fundamental claims which had been put forward by Freud himself in earlier times. Here, Freud challenges not only general opinion, but calls his own assertion underlying all psychoanalytic revelations in question. The intrepidity of his thinking reaches its zenith in this book.

We have become accustomed to consider the principle of self preservation of a living organism and the principle of its adaptation to the conditions of the environment in which it has to live as basic explanatory principles for all biological sciences. The instinct to preserve life and the life of the species, as well as the drive to adapt to the environment in the best and most painless way, appear to be the main forces driving all organic development. In complete agreement with these premises of traditional biology, Freud had earlier formulated a theory about two principles of

psychic activity. He named the higher tendency to which psychic processes are subordinate, the pleasure principle. However, the pursuit of pleasure and the avoidance of pain do not completely hold sway and are not exclusively the forces which direct psychic processes. The necessity of having to adapt creates the need for a careful awareness of the external world; at this stage a new principle of psychic activity is introduced, namely, the reality principle which at times dictates a denial of pleasure for the sake of 'something more dependable even if postponed'.³ All this is extremely elementary, a truism that to all appearance belongs to the realm of irrefutable, self evident truths.

However, the facts which are obtained by psychoanalytical research, propel the mind beyond the narrow confines of this self evident truth. *It is this attempt of the mind to reach farther than this truth – beyond the pleasure principle – which was the creative force behind this book.*

But according to Freud, even more elementary than this principle, and however paradoxical it may sound, is the principle of the death instinct, which is a basic primordial and universal principle common to all living matter. One has to differentiate between two sorts of instincts. The one which is more accessible to observation and has been studied for a long time is Eros in its wider sense, the Libido, which includes not only the sexual drive and its various manifestations, but the whole instinct of self preservation – these make up the life instinct. The other type of instinct, a typical example of which one can consider to be sadism, can be designated as the death instinct. As Freud says in another book, the purpose of this kind of impulse is 'to lead organic life back into the inanimate state', i.e. its goal is 'to re-establish a state of things that was disturbed by the emergence of life', for all life to regress to the inorganic existence of matter.⁴ At the same time, all positive life protecting tendencies such as the striving for self preservation etc. are regarded as component instincts, whose function is to assure that the organism shall follow its individual journey towards death and to ward off all extraneous probabilities of its returning to inorganic existence. At the same time, all life represents a drive to restore the disturbed life energy equilibrium, like circuitous paths (Umwege) towards death; this amounts to a perpetual struggle and compromise between two irreconcilable and opposite instincts.

A construction such as this produces natural resistance against itself for two reasons. Firstly, Freud [1920, p. 59] himself points out that this work stands in contrast to some of his other arguments. These had been nothing but direct and accurate translations of factual observations into the language of theory. But in this case, reflection frequently supplants observation – speculative thinking replaces the meagre factual material. Therefore, one may easily get the impression that in this case we are dealing with metaphysical speculation rather than scientifically reliable propositions. So it is not difficult to place an equals sign between what Freud himself calls the metapsychological point of view and a metaphysical one.

Secondly, on this point, anyone may find that another objection against the very essence of these ideas inevitably comes to mind. The suspicion arises that perhaps

these concepts are permeated with the psychology of hopeless pessimism and that the author may be attempting to smuggle in the decadent philosophy of Nirvana and death under the guise of biological principles. Does not the very suggestion that the only purpose of life is death, amount to nothing short of trying to dynamite the very foundations of scientific biology, the science of life?

Both objections should prompt anyone to approach the present work extremely cautiously and some may even find that there is no room for it within the system of scientific psychoanalysis and that it can be dismissed within the construction of any structured reflexological Freudian psychology. However, any careful reader will not find it difficult to persuade himself that both of these objections are unfounded and will not stand up to even the lightest touch of critical thinking.

Freud [1920, p. 57] himself points out the endless complexity and obscurity of the problems under investigation. He calls this field of study an equation with two unknown quantities or mysteries, where not so much as a ray of a hypothesis has penetrated. The scientific methods he uses completely put out of court any accusations as to the metaphysical nature of his speculations. It is, indeed, speculation, but a scientific one. It is metapsychology, not metaphysics. This work is a step beyond the boundaries of empirical knowledge, but not into the realm of the transcendental and supersensory, only into the domain of the hitherto insufficiently explored and illuminated. What is discussed throughout is the yet undiscovered, not the unknowable. Freud himself [1920, pp. 37, 60] insists that his only objective is sober results. He would be only too happy to exchange the metaphorical language of psychology for physiological and chemical terminology if this did not entail a renunciation of all attempts to describe the phenomena he was studying. Biology is a land of unlimited possibilities, and the author is prepared to concede that his positions may well end up being overturned.

Does this then mean that the author's own doubts about his suppositions deprive them of any scientific value or significance? Not on any account. The author [Freud, 1920, p. 59] says that he himself is equally unconvinced of the truth of his assumptions and he does not want to incline others to accept them either. He is not sure how far he believes in them himself. He thinks that at this stage one should completely do away with 'the emotional factor of conviction', that is the whole point. This demonstrates the true nature and scientific value of the ideas expressed in this work. Science does not consist exclusively of ready made judgements, found answers, viable theses and reliable facts and rules. In equal measure it includes the quest for truth, the processes of discovery, suppositions, experience and risks. Scientific thought differs from religious thought, in that it does not demand a belief in itself as a prerequisite. 'It is surely possible to throw oneself into a line of thought', says Freud [1920, p. 59], 'and to follow it wherever it leads out of simple scientific curiosity.' Freud himself says 'that psychoanalysis tried very hard not to become a system.'⁵ And if giddy thoughts await us on this journey, then we must exhibit courage to follow this endeavour fearlessly like a walk along Alpine mountain tracks, risking a fall down a precipice at any moment. 'Nur für Schwindelfreie', 'only for those free of vertigo',

according to Lev Shestov's wonderful phrase, do these Alpine routes open up in philosophy and science.⁶

In a situation such as this, when the author himself is ready to turn off his road at any moment and is the first to have doubts about the truth of his ideas, there obviously cannot be any talk about this book supposedly being saturated with the philosophy of death. There is no philosophy of any kind to be found in it; its origins are in exact science and it is directed toward exact science, but what it does do is to take a gigantic, vertiginous leap from the most extreme point of firmly established scientific facts into the undiscovered sphere beyond the obvious. But one must not forget that, in general, psychoanalysis has as its objective to battle its way through beyond what is apparent, and in some sense, the role of all scientific knowledge is not just to verify the obvious, but to uncover facts which are more credible and real than what is self evident; in the same way as Galilei's discoveries take us away beyond the obvious, so must the discoveries of psychoanalysis.

Misunderstandings are bound to occur, if only because some of the psychoanalytical terminology used by the author tends to be a bit ambiguous when it is applied to biological and chemical concepts. The death instinct and the striving towards death which is ascribed to all living organic matter may indeed, at first glance, easily appear to be a throw-back to pessimist philosophy. But the reason for this is the fact that until now, psychology was always in the habit of borrowing from biology its basic concepts, explanatory principles and hypotheses, and applying them and what had hitherto been accepted as valid for simpler living organisms to the realm of psychology. It seems that for the first time ever, in this instance, biology owes a debt to psychology and scientific thinking has simply been put into reverse gear, drawing its conclusions from the analysis of human psychology and applying them to universal laws of organic life. In this case biology borrows from psychology. Because of this, it is hardly necessary to point out that terms such as instinct, drive, etc., *lose their original character of psychological powers, and come to signify only general tendencies to be found in a living cell, without dependence on any philosophical evaluation of life and death within the framework of the human mind.* Without exception, Freud attributes such instincts to chemical and physiological processes within the living cell and only uses them to designate the direction of the restoration of the energy equilibrium.

The value and merit of any scientific hypothesis is measured by its practical advantage, that is, its contribution to progress and its use as a working explanatory principle. In this sense, the best evidence of the full scientific value of the hypothesis of a primary Todestrieb, is the subsequent development of the same ideas in Freud's book *Das Ich und das Es (The Ego and the Id)*,⁷ where the psychological theory about the complex structure of personality, about ambiguity and the destructive instinct, etc., are directly linked with the ideas which are developed in the present book.

But Freud's bold hypothesis for general biological conclusions shows even more promise. Once and for all it completely breaks with any teleological concepts in the spheres of psychology and biology. Every instinct is causally dependent on its previous condition which it strives to reinstate. Every instinct has a conservative

character and it is impelled backwards and not forwards. And this is how a bridge (a hypothetical one) is thrown across from the science of the origins and development of organic life to that dealing with inorganic matter. For the first time in this hypothesis, the organic whole is so decisively integrated into the general context of the world.

Freud is willing to concede that 'in every particle of living substance,' in every cell, both sorts of instincts coexist in mixed, unequal portions. And only as a result of the combination of the most primitive unicellular organisms to form multicellular forms of life 'the death instinct of the single cell can successfully be neutralized and the destructive impulses be diverted on to the external world'.⁸ Such ideas open up enormous possibilities for the study of social sublimation of these death instincts. 'The multicellular' social organism creates grandiose, countless possibilities for neutralizing and sublimating this death instinct by transforming it into creative impulses of the social human being.⁹

In view of all these reasons, we think that Freud's new book, because of its extraordinary courage and originality of thought, will be received both in learned circles and by the general reader with the attention and interest which it deserves. This interest should not, in any way, depend on whether or not the hypothesis put forward meets with approval or receives factual confirmation in the course of subsequent research and critical scrutiny. The very discovery of a new America – a country beyond the pleasure principle – like Columbus, provides a great service, even if it does not produce an exact geographical map of the new continent or colonize it. After all, the quest for truth is more fascinating, more enlightening, more fruitful and worthwhile than the already discovered, ready-made truth.

II

Even before the appearance of the Russian translation of this book, a lively discussion of the problems raised in it began in Russian scholarly circles. Among the opinions being expressed were claims that Freud had abandoned his initial position and that in this book he had entered upon a road which diverged widely from contemporary materialist thinking.

We think that a more fruitful approach to this book does not justify these suspicions. In *Jenseits des Lustprinzips* Freud develops ideas which he had presented in greater depth and breadth as the foundation stones of psychoanalysis, but now he invites us into his thinking laboratory. Essentially, everything in this book stems logically from Freud's earlier ideas, but still how new, and at times how shocking and original do these pages seem to us.

Nowhere does the author claim that his proposals are absolutely correct; he himself is not certain about their validity and by giving vent to his ideas, he only wishes to draw general biological conclusions based on data from aspects of psychic life which he had previously investigated. Where does this lead? What tendencies which may

have general methodological applications are hidden beneath these sometimes incomprehensible conjectures?

At the root of all the proposals in this book lies one single tendency, namely an attempt to produce a general biological scheme for psychic life. Freud is not entirely happy with psychic principles such as, for example, 'the pleasure principle,' which according to psychoanalysis regulate all human behaviour; he is searching for a deeper, more generally meaningful biological conformity with the laws of nature and he finds it in the general principle of the preservation of equilibrium – a general tendency observed in the inorganic world to maintain an evenly distributed level of energy tension. Stability and regression to inorganic existence, these are the basic tendencies of pure biology, whose echoes we find in the depths of the human psyche ('the compulsion to repeat former states').¹⁰ However, these strange processes found in psychic life are not special attributes of 'the spirit'; they only tell us something about the existence of more far-ranging laws which include both psychic activity and more fundamental biological processes. In this work, psychology is incorporated within the orbit of general biological phenomena and the same tendency which plays its part in the inorganic world is reflected in this psychology. For us, such a strange sounding concept as 'the death instinct' (Todestrieb) should mean nothing more than an ascertainment of an echo of some more profound laws of biological nature, an attempt to get away from a purely psychological concept of 'instinct' and to discover its true biological meaning.

From a purely psychological approach to the principles of psychic life and instincts to a biological approach – this is the route Freud takes in order to expand his earlier hypotheses.

However, if the biological conservative tendency to preserve the inorganic equilibrium is concealed in the deeper layers of psychic life, how can humanity's development from lower to higher forms be explained? Where are we to look for the root of the stormy progression of the historical process? Freud provides us with a highly interesting and deeply materialistic answer, i.e. if in the deep recesses of the human psyche there still remain conservative tendencies of primordial biology and if, in the final analysis, even Eros is consigned to it, then the only forces which make it possible for us to escape from this state of biological conservatism and which may propel us toward progress and activity, are external forces, in our terms, the external conditions of the material environment in which the individual exists. It is they that represent the true basis of progress, it is they that create the real personality and make it adapt and work out new forms of psychic life; finally they are the ones that suppress and transfer the vestiges of the old conservative biology. In this respect Freud's psychology is thoroughly sociological and it is up to other materialistic psychologists who find themselves in better circumstances than Freud to reveal and validate the subject of the materialistic foundations of this theory.

So, according to Freud, the history of the human psyche embodies two tendencies, the conservative–biological and the progressive–sociological. It is from these factors that the whole *dialectic of the organism* is composed and they are responsible for the

distinctive 'spiral' development of a human being. This book represents a step forwards and not backwards along the path to the construction of a whole, monistic system, and after having read this book a dialectician cannot fail to perceive its enormous potential for a monistic understanding of the world.

It is quite unnecessary to agree with every one of Freud's many postulates, and it is not necessary to share all his hypotheses, but what is important is to be able to discover one general tendency within the singular (perhaps not all of them of equal value) notions, and to manage to make use of it for a materialistic explanation of the world.

But one thing has definitely been accomplished in this work, and that is that psychology has lost its mystical specificity. Freud revealed that the same general biological laws which govern the rest of the world apply to it as well and that it has finally been totally debunked as a bearer of some 'higher' import [1920, p. 60]: 'The deficiencies in our description would probably vanish if we were already in a position to replace our psychological terms by physiological or chemical ones'.

Bourgeois science is giving birth to materialism; such labour is often difficult and prolonged, but we only have to find where in its bowels materialistic buds are showing, to find them, to rescue them and to make good use of them.

Notes

First published in Freud, S. 1925: *Po tu storonu principa udovol'stviya* (*Beyond the Pleasure Principle*) (pp. 3–16). Moscow: Sovremennye Problemy. Quotations and page numbers refer to the Standard Edition of Freud's complete works edited by J. Strachey and published by The Hogarth Press.

- 1 Refers to Freud's words in his 'On the history of the psycho-analytic movement' (1914, p. 21). See vol. 14 of the Standard Edition.
- 2 This whole account is based on Freud's own romantic description in his 'On the history of the psycho-analytic movement'. The terms 'splendid isolation', 'heroic age', the comparison to 'Robinson Crusoe on a desert island', and the phrase about 'the underworld of psycho-analysis' were all used by Freud himself to picture the alleged general resistance against his ideas. See pp. 22, 66 of vol. 14 of the Standard Edition.
- 3 Paraphrase of a passage in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920). See p. 10 of vol. 18 of the Standard Edition.
- 4 Quoted from Freud's text in *The Ego and the Id* (1923, p. 40). See vol. 19 of the Standard Edition.
- 5 Possibly a paraphrase of a passage in one of Freud's (1923) encyclopedia articles. See pp. 253–4 of vol. 18 of the Standard Edition.
- 6 Quotation from Shestov, L. *Apofeoz bespochvennosti* (1905/1991, p. 180). Leningrad: Izdatel'stvo Leningradskogo Universiteta. One of Shestov's (1905/1991, pp. 110; 178–80) major themes and the motto of part 2 of his book was that really interesting, metaphysical thinking requires the banishment of the dogmas of logic and science and is only feasible for those who do not fear the Alpine mountain tracks of speculation.

- 7 Available in Russian translation. Academia Publishers, Leningrad, 1924 [original footnote].
- 8 This quote and the one that follows it are taken from 'The Ego and the Id' (1923, p. 41). See vol. 19 of the Standard Edition.
- 9 The term 'multicellular' is used by Freud in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. See p. 50 of vol. 18 of the Standard Edition.
- 10 Paraphrase of Freud's argumentation in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. See pp. 36-7 of vol. 18 of the Standard Edition.