

**The theory of drive as negative ontology**  
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*Ich bin der Geist,  
der stets verneint.*  
Goethe

“I have an ontology – why not? – just as everyone has one, naive or elaborated”. A sentence that could not be unnoticed, especially being stated by a psychoanalyst. The fact that Jacques Lacan admits to having an ontology, as apparently everyone would, and the fact that he admits it in an absolutely natural way (why not having it?) poses many questions. For instance: why to relate considerations of ontological character to a praxis that seems quite attached to the particularity of the clinical case, as does psychoanalysis? Why should we search for some kind of relation between the direction of the treatment that orients analytical clinic and ontology? And above all, what kind of ontology could provide psychoanalysis with the proper presuppositions for the treatment direction?

Such questions expose the consequences of a larger hypothesis concerning Lacanian intellectual experience. At issue here is the claim that a major Lacanian contribution to psychoanalysis is the defense that in psychoanalysis a complex yet decisive articulation between clinic and ontology could be found. A slightly risky way to state that the direction of the analytical clinic depends on an invariable kernel of concepts that compose what is commonly called “metapsychology”.

Indeed, such an affirmation may not strike us as a given fact, especially at a time when the “clinic sovereignty” discourse is usually accepted with no further questioning – a sovereignty legitimated by the urgent reality of the suffering that brings the subject to analysis. As if the therapeutic efficiency that concerns an utterly normative phenomenal category such as “suffering” were enough a condition to assure the validity of clinical devices. In this sense, wherein a practice measures its validity by means of its efficiency in accomplishing normative dispositions variable according to social and historical contexts, there is no room for insisting on the articulation between clinic and ontology. Wherein a clinic is completely measured by its ability to “heal suffering”, there is indeed no room beyond the disciplinary implementation of normative devices<sup>1</sup>.

Nevertheless, this not the standpoint one could find in Lacanian clinical experience. It could be said that its peculiarity is due to the insistence on the relation between treatment direction and the acknowledgment of the ontological dignity of certain metapsychological concepts, especially drive (*Trieb*). Whence statements according to which the drive is “an absolutely central ontological notion that responds to a consciousness crisis no one has to fully apprehend, once it is lived” (LACAN, 1986, p. 152). The theory of drive is therefore what orients, invariably, the clinic in its validity claims. We can even say that, in Lacanian theory, any changes in the theory of drive always implies the loss of the analytical practice essentiality.

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<sup>1</sup> The canonical statement of Michel Foucault on the illusions of « clinic sovereignty » is valid in this quandary : « Since the XVIII century, medicine have had a tendency to tell its own history as if the dying bed have always been a stable and constant place of experience, as opposed to the theories and systems that were in permanent change and masked, under this speculation, the purity of the clinical evidence ». As a matter of fact, everything happens as if : « In the dawn of Humanity, before any system, medicine would be in an immediate relation of suffering with that that eases it » (FOUCAULT, 1994, pp. 59-60)

In this sense, this article is part of a larger research that evaluates some major features germane to the Lacanian reconstruction of metapsychology. Features that can only become clear if we abandon the traditional idea according to which on the core of Lacanian theory lays a simple structuralist reading of the unconscious and of its formation dynamics. Rather, Lacanian theory might have been encouraged by the effort to provide metapsychology with an ontological status that lays beyond any structuralism. An ontological status that manifests itself when Lacan mentions the “being of the subject” (and why should a psychoanalyst ever mention being?), or when he mentions the “essence of the object” of desire, not without complementing: “You realized I have spoken of the essence, as did Aristotle. Then what? It means those words are absolutely usable” (LACAN, 1975, p. 55).

But in order to properly set forth such a discussion on the Lacanian theory of drive, one ought to return to Freud. This return could help us to identify what is crucial to Lacanian intellectual experience within the long Freudian considerations on the status of drive.

### **From energetic to the metaphysics of death**

According to Freud, a theory of drive as *Grundbegriff* adds an indelible speculative aspect to the very core of psychoanalytical thought. Even if at some points Freud apparently stood by a certain materialist reductionism, for example when expecting the day when: “all of our temporary (*Vorläufigkeiten*) conceptions in psychology could be made out of organic supports (*Trägen*)” (FREUD, 1999a, p. 143-144), one should keep in mind how speculative was the physical and chemical energetic at the bottom of the formation of the scientific horizon found in Freudian. This is what Lacan bears in mind when stating: “energetic is also metaphysics” (LACAN, 1978, p. 80). If we notice the path of the concept of drive in Freudian texts, we shall see the nature of this speculative realm of the theory of drive.

When appearing explicitly for the first time, in *Three essays concerning sexual theory*, the term “drive” sought handling the internal sources of excitement that the organism cannot escape from. Among such sources of internal excitement, sexuality already emerges as a larger issue in Freudian concerns, despite the fact that it is not the exclusive source. Already in the unpublished *Project for a scientific psychology*, when addressing the “urgency of life” (*Not des Lebens*) as an internal excitement that works against the inertia principle of the psychical device, Freud recalled that hunger and breathing were also sources of such excitement. In this first addressing of the drive, Freud also insisted that one of its main characteristics is that it is a continuous force, not only the force of the momentary impact of a lack felt by the organism. Whence the definition of drive as “psychical representation (*Psychische Repräsentanz*) of an endosomatic source of excitement”.

Up to here, nothing points to the need to transform the concept of drive into the basis for speculative worries. At a first glance, Freud seems to be closer to a materialist explanation of psychical casual processes, or yet, of a standpoint – classically a part of medicine ever since Broussais – that regards *excitement* as the primary vital fact. But problems concerning the definition of the status of drives appear from the moment Freud seeks to define the nature of the energy responsible for this constant internal excitement.

Freud starts with a distinction between libidinal energy proper to sexuality and “other forms of psychical energy” such as those at stake in the physiological needs of self-preservation. This distinction initiated the first drive dualism among sexual drives

and self-preservation drives. Such dualism is suspended once the category of “narcissism” is born, since narcissism allows Freud to recognize that: “self-preservation drives were also libidinal, were drives that had taken as objects the very self, instead of exterior objects” (FREUD, 1999b, p. 231). Hence his statement according to which: “It is enough to admit that drives are qualitative akin and their effects are exclusively due to excitement (*Erregungsgrößen*) value that each drive carries, or perhaps to certain functions of its quantity” (FREUD, 1999a, p. 216). As we shall consider ahead, it is an extremely symptomatic reduction of qualitative difference to quantitative value. After the article *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, drive dualism returns in a reconfigured fashion. At this moment of deep reconfiguration of the libido idea, Freud turns to considerations on the concept of *Trieb* that took into account the German idealist tradition, specially the work of Schopenhauer (before him, the concept of *Trieb* plays an important role in Fichte and Hegel, among others).

We can see how the key idea to understanding the nature of drive energy is *libido*. Freud customarily defines it as a quantitatively variable force that allows the comparison of processes and transpositions in the realm of sexual excitement. When trying to understand the logic of sexual behavior from the point of view of an endosomatic plastic energy quantitatively characterized, Freud updates a long rationalist tradition that sought to define psychology as a “physics of external sense”, that is, as that which allows “determining the quantitative constants of sensation and the relation between such constants” (CANGUILHEM, 2002, p. 370). This is how should be understood the Freudian epistemic dependence on Fechner’s psychophysics – according to whom “the general principles of psychophysics involve nothing but the handling of quantitative relations” (FECHNER, 1966, p. 9)<sup>2</sup>, as well as his dependence on Helmholtz and Du Bois-Raymond, to whom there are only physical and chemical forces acting in the organism<sup>3</sup>.

On the other hand, such vocabulary of energy and force, far from being just a scientific metaphor that prevents the unveiling of psychoanalysis’s real character as a practice based on the clinical use of self-reflection processes (a theme for a long tradition of criticism to metapsychology that embraces names as distinct from one another as Politzer, Habermas and Ricoeur), is actually how Freud manages to indicate the relationship between drive and the realm of an unreflective (and not yet structured) foundation to behavior and thinking.

About that, one shall recall the libido characterization as an energy *quantum* does not aim at some form of “measurement” of psychical processes among themselves. There is true that Freud define the *economic* standpoint (which, along with the *topographical* and the *dynamic* standpoints, draws the apprehension perspective of metapsychological facts) as that which “tries to follow the destinies (*Schicksale*) of the excitement (*Erregungsgrößen*) value and to obtain an estimate (*Schätzung*) at least pertinent to them” (FREUD, 1999a, p. 280). But the statement says what it means. If the estimate problem is affected by a relativism clause, it is in order to remind us that what

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<sup>2</sup> Fechner’s idea of kinetic energy (*Lebendige Kraft*) was important to the constitution of Freudian’s notion of drive and its attempt to end the dualism between psychical and somatic. Keeping this ending in mind Fechner states: « Kinetic energy employed to chop wood and kinetic energy used in thinking are not only comparable, but each can be transformed into the other, and therefore both kinds of work are measurable on their physical side by a common yardstick» (FECHNER, 1966, p. 36).

<sup>3</sup> In this sense, in the words of Canguilhem : « If we add that Descartes, even though he is not exactly the inventor of the term and concept of reflex, at least has affirmed the constancy of the link between excitement and reaction, we realize that a psychology understood as mathematical physics of the external sense begins with him to get to Fechner, thanks to the helping hand of physiologists such as Hermann Helmholtz » (CANGUILHEM, 2002, p. 370).

is truly important concerns apprehending the path, the “destiny” of the libidinal energy *quanta*<sup>4</sup>. Actually, it demonstrates that the economic standpoint is what allows Freud to think the plasticity proper to a psychical energy characterized mainly by its ability to be transposed, inverted (Freud uses, in such cases, the term *Verkehrung*), deviated, repressed – to sum up, dislocated in an apparently inexhaustible manner. Taking this constant dislocating principle into account, Freud initially characterizes libido as a free circulating energy, “free energy” in relation to that which could bar such movement, that is, in relation to its binding (*Bändigung*) through the submission to representations (*Vorstellung*).

The fact that Freud had predominantly thought of such plasticity considering phenomena linked to sexuality is absolutely central. Indeed, he sought to show how in the subject lies something which is not reflectively determined as the consciousness representation, something which can only manifest itself in polymorphic, fragmented ways and finds its own privileged realm necessarily on a sexuality no longer subdued to the reproduction logic, on a bodily impulse that knows not finalist *telos* – as reproduction does. This is why libido is at first characterized as self-erotic<sup>5</sup>, inconsistent, for being subdued to primary processes, and finally, perverse, for having its targets constantly inverted, deviated and fragmented.

As we shall see ahead, this libido is actually dependent on a concept of *nature* thought as the realm of what gains its intelligibility from reducing its phenomena to the general concept of “energy”. However, when benefiting sexuality and determining its essentiality by means of the “free energy” notion, Freud prevents nature from emerging as the positive plan of sense attribution. We must say that: “the image of human nature that follows from these Freudian conceptualization is that of a split (and conflictual) nature, whereby ‘sexual’ refers to this split” (ZUPANCIC, 2008, p. 18). From *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* on, such an impossibility shall explicitly allow the fundamental articulation between theory of drive and a concept of nature as the room for a certain “negativity”.

Nonetheless some consequences ought to be taken from this complex articulation between representation and libido thought as free energy. One of them shall be perceptible once two canonic statements about drive are brought together. The first one is taken from the text *The unconscious*: “a drive cannot be rendered into an object (*Objekt*) of consciousness; only the representation that represents it can do so (*die Vorstellung die ihn repräsentiert*)” (FREUD, 1999a, 275-276). The second, written around the same time, reminds that the object of drive “is that which is more variable (*variabelste*) in the drive. Originally it is not connected (*verknüpft*) to it (...) It could be replaced at will in the course of the destinies drive gets to know” (Idem, p. 215). If we define “object” as which results from the categorization procedures of a consciousness that unifies the manifold of sensibility into synthetic representations, then we could say the drive only manifests itself to the consciousness through its binding to objects representation. A feeble bind though, marked by the structural variability of that which cannot be essentially objectified; a bind operated by a representation unable to present what cannot be unified, or still, what cannot be thought within structured relations.

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<sup>4</sup> On the use of the term « destiny » in such context : « It indicates what is at stake in a human being regarding their drives is typically human and a product of singular beings. At the same time, a drive, due to the fact that its components escape from the subject, emerges as anonymous, depersonalized, a-subjective » (DAVID-MÉNARD, 2001, p. 207).

<sup>5</sup> Self-erotism is a position previous to narcissism. In this sense, it indicates the polymorphy of a libido that is directed towards the pleasure of organs that are not yet subdued to a general principle of unification provided by the self as a synthetic unity.

We need to have these problems in mind if we want to understand the meaning of the concept of “death drive” – a crucial concept also to Lacanian metapsychology, for according to Lacan “every drive is virtually a death drive” (LACAN, 1966, p. 818). As we shall see later on, this is the central affirmation to understanding the Lacanian idea of drive, because it is a reminder that the French psychoanalyst usually uses in his clinic a very particular modality of *drive monism* – and it is not by chance he refers to *drive* always in the singular.

Following this Lacanian trail, Jean Laplanche claims that a deep metamorphosis occurs afterwards when Freud bounds the libido idea to Eros unifying power (such as it is found in Aristophanes myth, in Plato’s *Symposium*). Libido definition as unifying Eros, a power that aims at “forming, through the living thing, constantly bigger unities (*Einheiten*) and thus preserve life in its endurance taking it to more complex developments” (FREUD, 1999b, p. 233) seems to show the abandonment of the idea of libido as a free energy, a idea typical of this fragmented and polymorphic sexuality that has always been a theme in Freud’s studies. This abandonment is driven by Freudian thought on narcissism with its projection and introjection mechanisms that unify drive’s destinies with the repetition of the image of the self<sup>6</sup>. As if narcissism could reveal a *pathos* of a self understood as a synthetic unity that provides the binding principle (*Verbindung*) of the manifold of sensibility experience (to a large extent, the interest of philosophers such as Theodor Adorno on psychoanalysis has its starting point here, that is, in some kind of thought on the “pathologies of transcendental schematism”).

In this context, to reconstruct the drive dualism through the pair Eros and death drive would be the result of the need to find a new destiny to the un-binding power typical of the free energy that initially defined libido. That is to say, life and death polarity in the Freudian theory of drive actually covers the distinction between a) energy bound to representations through the synthetic ability of self and b) free energy that inaugurates the psychic dynamics<sup>7</sup>.

But the reason why Freud uses the term “death” to talk about this un-binding power is not evident at first. This is a point Lacan clearly mentions: “There is a dimension beyond the homeostasis of self (*moi*), another chain, another need that ought to be distinguished in its plan. This compulsion to turning back to something that has been excluded from the subject, or that has never been absorbed by them, the *Verdrängt*, the repressed, we cannot force it onto the pleasure principle [*that is now mixed up with Eros*] (...) It is necessary then to presuppose another principle. Why did Freud named it death instinct?” (LACAN, 1978, p. 163).

This question is justified by the fact that this turn seems at first disproportional in relation to the problem dimension (to preserve the sexuality disruptive power beyond the self unifying force, a force whose extension was revealed mainly by narcissism).

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<sup>6</sup> In the words of Laplanche : « Eros is that which seeks to maintain, preserve and even enhance the cohesion and the synthetic tendency both of the living being and the psychic life. While, ever since psychoanalysis origins, sexuality was in its essence hostile to bind, a principle of ‘un-bind’ or of unchaining (*Entbildung*) that would only bind through the ego intervention, that which emerges with Eros is the bound and binding form of sexuality, brought to light by the discovery of narcissism » (LAPLANCHE, 1970, p. 187). That explains why, in Freud : « The ego emerges as a defensive, inhibitory structure that functions (...) to establish a restricted economics of impulses and their discharge » (BOOTHBY, 2001, p. 285).

<sup>7</sup> What makes us come to terms with Boothby, to whom : « The most crucial idea, rarely stated explicitly precisely because it is so fundamental to Freud’s entire outlook, is the assumption of an inevitable and irremediable disjunction between the level of somatic excitations and their psychical representation. There is always a remainder, an irrecoverable left-over, a portion of the body’s energies that fail to receive adequate registration in the battery of *Triebrepräsenzen* » (BOOTHBY, *ibidem*, pp. 286-287).

Unless the problem Freud sensed were indeed bigger than it seemed. That is the only way we could presuppose some kind of unity between phenomena apparently so distinct as these Freud tries to consider by means of the death drive idea, that is, the compulsion to repeat traumatic events, the phenomenon of cure resistance and of attachment to the disease that psychoanalysis names “negative therapeutic reaction”, the organization of a destiny to libido as free energy, and finally the economic problem of masochist phantasms that apparently separates desire and pleasure.

To answer the issue of the real problem the last Freudian theory of drive was striving to resolve demands to remind how the reconstruction of the theory of drive through the dichotomy life / death was something in agreement with an apparent redefinition of the very concept of drive. Drive is now a “pressure (*Drang*) inherent to the living organism towards the reestablishment of a previous [inorganic] state abandoned due to disturbing influences of exterior sources” (FREUD, 1999b, p. 38), and not only the psychic representation of an endosomatic source of constant excitement. From the first to the second definition, a certain *teleological* character is added, one that orients the direction of drive pressure to the path of an operation of return. The drive then emerges as the expression of the organic life inertia, as the demand for work towards the reestablishment of a state of tension suppression. A tendency that manifests itself primarily through the figure of repetition understood as return movement towards the annihilation of an individual determined as what orients its conduct through the self conservation.

In this context Freudian speculation flirts more clearly with a certain death metaphysics, all of it founded in a real philosophy of nature. Practically missing in the first theory of drive, this inflection towards metaphysics, especially through Schopenhauer (not to mention Plato, to illustrate the unifying power of Eros, and Empedocles), should not be seen as some kind of mere deviation. Indeed, several principles of Fechner’s psychophysics that will later on appear on Helmholtz, Mach and others, important theoretical base to the formation of Freudian theory of drive, are familiar to Schopenhauer’s philosophy and its consideration of forces dynamics. In the same manner, such principles are not immune to metaphysical presuppositions, what is quite clear especially in Fechner. So everything goes by as if Schopenhauer provided Freud with some kind of stretched intelligibility of that which has continued to insinuate itself within the energetic.

In this sense, it is worthy to remind how the general explanations of human and natural behavior by means of the forces dynamics, considered as the figure of a metaphysics of the Will as being in-itself, is what provokes Schopenhauer to see in death a protocol of “return to the nature’s womb” (SCHOPENHAUER, 1998, p. 71). For the individual’s death would only demonstrate the permanence of forces as opposed to the transitory nature of states and forms: “already considered a natural force, the vital force remains completely immune to the change of forms and states produced by the sequence of causes and effects” (Idem, p. 74). It could even be said that death emerges in this context as power of suspension of bindings processes, suspension of representations that produce individualizations. This is why Schopenhauer works with a dichotomy between the species immortality as an “Idea” and the destructibility of the individuals. This dichotomy will emerge in a reconfigured form in the very core of Freudian theory of drive; and that is done distinguishing *soma* and *plasma* according to Weismann.

Nevertheless, there are a couple of fundamental differences. Schopenhauer insists on death as destruction of the individual only to remind that: “Asking for immortality in individuality really means to be willing to perpetuate an error infinitely.

For, at bottom, each individuality is nothing but a special error, a misstep, something that would be better off, yes, something from which bringing us back is indeed the aim of every life” (Idem, 110). It could not be different since death is simultaneously thought as that which is inserted in the *telos* of the nature renewal vital cycle and as a mode of access to intelligibility (access to intelligibility that is not exactly a reflective knowledge) of an unbound force dynamics that freely passes from one form to another and never perpetuates none of them. Death is the name of the process that reveals nature as an everlasting cycle of individuation and obliteration of individuation of forces configuration, as if we stood by a cycle of pulsation between free energy and bound energy. So according to Schopenhauer, death, far from being a phenomena that makes no sense, a negation with no concept, is that which furthestmost guarantees nature as a *positive pole of sense attribution*, because it unveils the mechanisms of vital force orientation.

Indeed, that is not the case when it comes to Freud. Freud believed, as well as Schopenhauer did, that death is more than destruction of the biological organism integrity, it is also what suspends the principle of individuation and of synthetic unity working in the self. Which is why, according to Freud, it may emerge as source of drive dynamics responsible for processes such as the repetition of traumatic and not-symbolized events and that negative therapeutic reaction considered as resistance to subjectivation processes at work in the analytical clinic. However, there is nothing in Freud akin to the teleological affirmation of life as everlasting cycle of destruction and reconfiguration: a result of some kind of general principle of energy preservation. On the contrary, the death drive notion is closer to the absorption of an energetic concept such as entropy considered as a principle of what only emerges as loss, principle of that which cannot be configured into a state subdued to an ordination protocol<sup>8</sup>. So Freud regards death as the presence of that which does not let itself be absorbed within a notion of nature as the positive pole of sense attribution, presence of that which cannot be counted into vitalist economics.

However, Freud operates within his theory of drive a very peculiar concept of nature. The tendency to use the theory of drive to explain principles of behavior of organisms *in general* (which is a certain “bringing up-to-date” of explanatory holistic principles typical of the nineteenth century psychophysics) ought to be seen as presupposition for a non-thematized concept of nature. A nature that cannot be thought by means of figures of vital cycle or of some form of ordination functionalism, but that manifests itself necessarily as resistance to integration to each and every principle of positive determination<sup>9</sup>. To base a clinic and its healing protocols on such presupposition about the notion of nature is not without difficulties.

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<sup>8</sup> In this sense, Assoun states that the Freudian concept of energy : « marks a ‘passage’ between two states that translates a mechanical expense, itself the particular expression (motion) of the general enhance of disorder stated by the second principle of thermodynamics (Carnot-Clausius). What could be expressed from now on as : ‘every drive, to the extent it is drive, is death drive’ » (ASSOUN, 1981, pp. 182-183).

<sup>9</sup> Theodor Adorno has clearly understood this eminently negative definition of nature existent in Freudian considerations. Let’s recall, for exemple, the Adornian definition of mimesis (central operator of reconciliation between subject and nature). It is a : «trend to lose oneself in the environment (*Umwelt*) instead of playing an active role in it; the tendency to let oneself go and sink back into nature. Freud called it death drive (Todestrieb), Caillois *le mimetisme* » (ADORNO, and HORKHEIMER, 1997, p. 227). If according to Adorno the death drive indicates the reconciliation with nature, then we shall admit several consequences. For the Freudian death drive expose the libidinal economics that impulses the subject to bound to a nature understood as the realm of the inorganic, a major figure of material opacity to reflection processes. This “tendency to get lost in the environment” Adorno refers to with death drive in mind is the result of self-recognition in that which is not symbolically unscripted. (see SAFATLE, 2006, pp. 9-19)

Maybe that explains, among other things, the symptomatic position of the death drive within the Freudian clinic. Indeed, the place the death drive occupies in Freudian clinic is complex and hard to be deciphered. One shall recall only that, in a text from the final phase such as *Analysis Terminable and Interminable*, Freud wonders whether there are limits to the drive's bindings (*Bändigung*) to representations – something that could be understood as a matter concerning the possibility to dominate mainly the repetition typical of the death drive. The answer is programmatic: the correction *a posteriori* of the primal repression (*Urverdrängung*) may control the effective force of the quantitative factor of drive. But Freud is the first to acknowledge the infinitude of the drive force when stressing the unending character of its domain: “One may doubt dragons of the early times are actually dead to the very last” (FREUD, 1999c, p. 73). As if analytical symbolization could not dissolve this repetitive forcing of the death drive.

However, the death drive negativity shall not be embodied by the Freudian clinic as the engine of the healing processes. The repetition emerges as the *boundary* of the clinic and the mechanisms of remembrance (*Erinnerung*), verbalization and reflective symbolization typical of Freudian modes of subjectivation. The only way Freud may consider negativity of death drive within the clinic is as a negative therapeutic reaction, as destruction of the other in transference and as other manifestations of masochist or sadist phantasms that have to be annihilated *so as to take the subject to the end of their analysis*. The Freudian program of “binding (*bändig*) the repetition and transforming it into a reason to remember (*Motiv fürs Erinnern*)” (FREUD, 1999b, p. 134) thanks to the closure of a repetition usually mistaken for transference shall remain valid all along, even if Freud encounters a limit to its efficacy.

### **Lacan and the clinic of the death drive**

Given this impasse, the most common way out of the psychoanalytic posterity has been to abandon this amalgam Freud has made with his death drive concept. It has been widely insisted that the death drive was a social fact linked to the destruction impulse in societies that socialize subjects through repressive processes of guiltiness (Marcuse is a clear instance of that) or that it was simply a metaphysical waste with no clinical function whatsoever, for there was no need for the clinic to appeal to abstract forces assumed in the anteroom of the phenomena it considers.

In this sense, one of the most peculiar features of Jacques Lacan has been his attempts to reorient the analytical clinic through the centrality of the death drive. As a matter of fact, recognition of such centrality is now regarded as the engine of analytical progress and treatment direction. The real clinical problem, according to Lacan, is not to limit the destruction impulse of the death drive or to allow life to operate constantly larger processes of unification. On the contrary, it is about initially producing a rupture from this unity desired by Eros, unity that according to Lacan was fundamentally narcissistic and imaginary once it was connected to projection and introjection of the self image. In this manner, Lacan has the merit of understanding death drive beyond the repetitive-compulsion of the destruction instinct. This opened up the possibility of a new path for thinking the figures of the negative in the clinic to be structured.

In this effort Lacan has initially tried to approximate the death drive disruptive power and a “negativity” concept inherited from French considerations on Hegel's *Begierde*, the first mode of manifestation of subjectivity's individuality. He also approximate death drive and some moments of experience of confrontation with death that surpass the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. However, philosophical loans always bear a particularity: they are the only ones in which those who borrow take more than they

realize. So we are entitled to ask whether Lacan has not brought to the core of the psychoanalytic theory of drive a concept of negation that has, in Hegel, a clearly ontological status, since it is linked to how that which is determined as essence manifests. Such concept of negativity was used to handle what was already manifesting itself when Freud sought to “naturalize” the death drive, by making it a concept that orients the intelligibility of each and every living being’s behavior.

Before we go any further on this point, we should recall that, indeed, the way Lacan has treated the psychoanalytic theory of drive can only become intelligible if understood as the development of his initial thoughts on the status of desire in analytical clinic. It could even be said that the question of drive status acquires centrality in Lacanian intellectual experience from the moment he finds himself in the position of dealing with some points he had left unexamined in his theory of desire.

On this matter, one should remember that the main feature of desire according to Lacan is to ignore any natural proceeding of objectification. It is fundamentally without object, desire for “nothing to be named” (*rien de nomable*) (LACAN, 1978, p. 261). Here we perceive the careful reader of Kojève’s works. The same Kojève who tried to sew the Heideggerian being-for-death to the Hegelian *Begierde* in order to allege that the truth of desire is to be the “revealing of an emptiness” (KOJÈVE, 1992, p. 12), that is, pure negativity that transcends every natural and imaginary adherence. A strange desire unable to be satisfied with empirical objects and ripped off of every immediate possibility to phenomenal accomplishment.

This pure negative transcendence, connected to the intentional function of a desire that insists beyond every object relation, is given as something Lacan cannot turn a blind eye to in his early writings and seminars. The reason why comes from Lacan’s development of a theory of object constitution supported especially by thoughts on narcissism. Actually, Lacan articulates the *constitutive character* of the I in connecting the manifold of sensibility with object representations and the *empirical genesis* of the function of the I by means of a logic of narcissistic identifications. In this manner, at this point of Lacanian thought both the objects and the other empirical individuals are always narcissistic projections of the I. Lacan even mentions the *egomorphic character* of the objects of *empirical world*. It follows from there a *fundamental narcissism* that guides every object relation, as well as the need to cross this narcissistic regime of relation through a critique of the object primacy in determining desire.

The reason for criticizing the object primacy will emerge in Lacan’s psychoanalysis especially through the critique of relations reduced to the Imaginary realm, since most of the Lacanian Imaginary stands for the sphere of relations that compose the narcissism logic, with its projections and introjections<sup>10</sup>. Roughly, it could be said that, according to Lacan, the Imaginary is some kind of *space-time categorization scheme* that works including the manifold of sensibility in the image (in this sense, Lacan is very close to the theory of image and schematism found in Heidegger’s *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics*). This image, however, unifies the diverse by means of a binding and identity principle derived from the very I as a self-identical and synthetic unity. It is, on its turn, the real name of that which is at stake in representation, at least in Lacan’s view. Hence this Lacanian close linkage of Imaginary, narcissism and *representation*.

Here it is necessary to emphasize an important point: the *empirical object* necessarily emerges as an *object subdued to the engineering of the Imaginary*. The possibility of libidinal fixation to an empirical non-narcissistic object is not yet given.

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<sup>10</sup> "We consider narcissism to be the imaginary relation crucial to interhuman relationship." (LACAN, 1981, p. 107).

Therefore, so as to rid the subject of fascination for objects that at bottom are narcissistic productions, psychoanalysis had to “purify the desire” of any empirical content. Subjectifying the desire in its brutal point of emptiness. For the link of desire to object representations implies alienation of a being that is thought as transcendence. Hence the definition – uttered in an undeniable Sartrean accent – of desire negativity as *manqué d’être*: “Desire is a relation of the being to the lack. This lack is lack of being (*manqué d’être*) per se. It is not lack of this or that, but lack of being through which being exists” (LACAN, 1978, p. 261). Leading the subject into recognizing the being as lack-of-being (as Lacan will subsequently adopt in order to distance himself from Sartre) is the major strategy of analytical practice.

This is the scheme that animated Lacan first few thoughts on the theory of drive. Ever since his early seminars, Lacan tends to understand the unity produced by the Eros as submission of the other to the logic of narcissism, defining then the binding of psychic energy as “capture by the form, apprehension by the game, absorption in life mirage” (Idem, p. 110). The Imaginary has a unifying power that consists in linking the subject to another who is essentially the ego image. As if the constantly bigger unities Freud mentions were built with the binding of the diverse of representations and affections to the *image* of the same. Thus, the disintegrating force of the death drive is since the very beginning aimed against the imaginary coherence of the I and its imaginary object relations. In several moments, this drive disintegrating force is presented as that which brings the subject beyond a pleasure linked to the libidinal energy submission to a principle of homeostasis guaranteed by “the transference of *Vorstellung* quantity in *Vorstellung*” (LACAN, 1986, p. 72), that is, libidinal energy submission to the form of representations. That may explain why the emergence of drive emerges constantly surrounded with the theme of an enjoyment that flirts with the formless, enjoyment beyond the pleasure principle, which means, at bottom, enjoyment beyond the submission to representations. At this point, a constant use of reasons and examples taken from Bataille is necessary to Lacan.

Bataille also sets a program largely close to the Lacanian imperatively. “Canceling the subject and the object”, he writes, “is the only way not to end in the possession of the object by the subject, that is, to avoid the absurd race of the *ipse* willing to be transformed into the whole” (BATAILLE, 1998, p. 67). The engine of such cancellation emerges as well by means of a certain thematic connected to death experience as a way out of anthropology primacy: “anyone who does not ‘die’ for only being a man will always be nothing but a man” (Idem, p. 47). Nevertheless, this possible filiations between Lacan and Bataille seems to cause several problems. For it could indicate that, when transforming the death drive into a central concept to analytical progress, Lacan is actually being seduced by some kind of *clinical implementation of aestheticizing claims of limit experiences; a implementation thought in accordance with themes of formless and heterology*.

Indeed, that is a lingering risk, but it not concerns what was truly at stake in Lacanian intellectual experience. We should keep in mind how Lacan uses the death drive at first to organize some distinctions between the Imaginary and Symbolic realm considered from a structuralist perspective, that is, thought as a structure of pure signifier that organize the linguistic and social differences. On the other hand, Lacan has never advocated any kind of subject cancellation, but only the cancellation of its emergence in the self-identical notion of I.

At this point we should take a moment to think of the very first sentence in the *Écrits*: “Our research has led us to the point of recognizing that the repetition automatism (*Widerholungszwang*) finds its principle in that that we have named the

insistence of the signifier chain” (LACAN, 1966, p. 11). What Lacan says is: this repetition that cannot fit into any logic that aims to explain the conduct of the psychic device only by means of pleasure maximizing and escaping from displeasure is actually a manifestation of the manner how the symbolic structure works. Something quite distinct from what Freud had in mind when trying to think about the compulsion to repeat traumatic and unpleasurable situations typical of some neurotics or about the attempt to domain processes of loss based on a symbolizing repetition (as it happens in the famous *fort-da* example).

What Lacan seeks when approximating signifier chain and repetition automatism is, on the one hand, to keep in mind that the free energy typical of the un-binding force of death drive produces the same primary processes of condensation, dislocation and figuration that provide the ground to the dynamics of the signifier. Hence the possibility of approximation. This is how he understands that which Freud names net (*Netz*) character and flow (*Flüssigkeit*) of the drive. A daring as well as feeble proposition, since the articulation of the signifier chain knows not the dissemination recurrent in that that characterizes as free energy. On the contrary, the signifier chain bears an coordinating and articulating power typical of every symbolic construction. That is, its job is a binding job strange to that which belongs to the death drive realm.

But there is yet another aspect to approximation. When articulating death drive and signifier, Lacan seems to indicate there is no such thing as the particularity of drive and impulse in confrontation with the social and intersubjective linguistic universe. On the contrary, the drive is already somehow constitutively bound to that which allows the subjects to socialize through the access to language (here there is an instructive parallel with the Hegelian concept of *Trieb*). At the furthest, it is not suppressed due to the processes of subjects socialization. It is from the very start what leads subjects to the use of language – on the condition that a very peculiar regime of language is made real. For this language that Lacan has in mind is completely anti-realistic insofar as it is not composed by signs, but only by pure signifier, that is, by terms that have no denotative force, that do not denote any object whatsoever. A cancellation of the factual quality of reference that Lacan describes in the following fashion : “The signifier only manifest initially the presence of the difference as such, and nothing else. The first thing implied is the relation of the sign to the thing to be erased” (LACAN, 1961-1962, section of 12/06/61).

On that account, Lacan could state that “the scheme of the symbol as death of the thing is found here” (LACAN, 1994, p. 377). As if the negation impulse recurrent in the death drive was at work or yet as if it were satisfied every time the signifier appeared as cancellation of the thing *as a reified object constituted by the Imaginary logic*. For in its essence the signifier would not be a denotation device, but only a device that marks the woeful inadequacy between words and things, inadequacy between a signifier chain that is articulated in the manner of a free energy flow and things thought as that which is subdued to imaginary unities. Lacan hence seeks to fit his understanding of the death drive centrality into an inadequacy logic as the surplus of the socialization processes through a language composed by signifiers. On the other hand, he links the signifier not to a matter of object denotation, but to a matter of drive satisfaction. As if the language usages were all subdued to practical interests of satisfaction.

As it was mentioned earlier, this Lacanian strategy was ambivalent and difficult to be sustained as it was initially thought of. On the one hand, the signifier chain is interdependent on a work of binding and ordaining the object world that has nothing to do with the death drive. Is true that Lacan wants to insist that the death drive is not sheer

transgressive destruction impulse towards a mortifying enjoyment, but it is what seeks to handle the intelligibility of socialization processes. On the other hand, the signifier chain describes exactly the free flow of energy that denies what is bound under the form of an object, under the form of representation.

However, this contradiction could be called creative. Clearly Lacan seeks a formalization regime able to handle a subject relation to a drive that cannot be thought by means of a representation language – language that within the Lacanian cartography is subdued to the logic of the Imaginary. But Lacan has to explain how can the subject structure relations to what cannot be articulated according to binding principles derived from the I as synthetic unity may be properly thematized. The emphasis here is in the imperative of “structuring relations” that are not tributary to a return to some kind of immediate intuition.

### **An ontological negation for the clinic**

Before we continue, it is appropriate to insist that this problem found in Lacan, a problem that could be pointed as the legacy of a certain Freudian path, provides a provisory explanation to the notion of drive as an ontological concept. When linking the death drive to that which is satisfied with the negating power of the language, Lacan completely reorganizes the traditional idea of symbolization as submission to the representation organizing power; and that in order to find a more adequate way to deal with the modes of relation to what appears to a subject as irreducibility of the negativity typical of the death drive. This irreducibility has an ontological weight since it is based on an idea of negation as ontological mode of access to the essence.

The term “ontology” could seem strange here. Nevertheless, before we legitimate this estranging, we should wonder whether the ontology could be thought no longer as a regime of *positive discursiveness* of the being *qua* being. Regime that as soon as set tends to normalize the realms of praxis by determining *a priori* the configuration of its possibilities. When rendering problematic the relationship between positiveness and ontology, we open the doors to think ontology as the regime that withstands the reality of what blocks the full draining of being into a positive determination. In this sense, a *negative* ontology, that is, a thinking regime based on the ontological reality of the negation experiences, could be guiding the Lacanian clinical decisions, as well as the direction he seeks to impose to the treatment<sup>11</sup>.

Perhaps the difficulty in accepting such statements comes from the fact that the Lacanian path regarding the ontological character of certain metapsychological concepts is not exactly traced in a straight line. We should recall for instance what he stated during his eleventh seminar, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, a few days before accepting he had an ontology: “when speaking of this gap (*béance*), one is dealing with an ontological function, by which I thought I had to introduce, it being the most essential, the function of the unconscious. The gap of the unconscious may be said to be *pre-ontological*. I have stressed that all too often forgotten characteristic – forgotten in a way that is not without significance – of the first emergence of the unconscious, namely, that it does not lend itself to ontology” (LACAN, 1973/1997, p. 29) since that which belongs to the order of the unconscious “is neither being, nor non-being, but the unrealized” (Idem, p. 30). Indeed, this idea that what belongs to the order of the unconscious is pre-ontological takes us straight to Merleau-Ponty and his flesh

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<sup>11</sup> Alain Badiou points an interesting manner to think an ontological negation in Lacan when stating that there is, in the Lacanian psychoanalysis, an access to ontology, once : “the unconscious is this being that subverts the metaphysical opposition between being and non-being” (BADIOU, 1982, p. 152).

*ontology*. But it is valuable to rebuild the context of such statement in order to realize what is at stake here.

On the previous section of this seminar, Lacan had discussed the idea of “unconscious causality” with the help of the last pages of Kant’s *Attempt to Introduce the Concept of Negative Magnitudes into Philosophy*. Lacan had in mind above all the Kantian distinction between logical ground and real ground. Concerning the logical ground, Kant states, in 1763: given a ground, it can be derived a logical consequence according to the obedience to the identity rule. Thus: “Men is fallible, and the ground of such fallibility lies in the finitude of his nature, for when the concept of a finite spirit is decomposed the fallibility therein is revealed, that is, it coincides with that which is contained in the concept of a spirit” (KANT, 1969, p. 202). But in the real ground something can follow something else without obeying the rule of identity, for example when I say the moon phases cause the tide. Kant claims that only “simple and indecomposable concepts of real ground, whose relation to the consequence cannot be distinct at all” (Idem, p. 204) can handle the real ground. Lacan insists that this idea of an indecomposable concept that aims at formalizing the causal relation between a real ground and its consequence is adequate to determine the specificity of the causality at work in the unconscious. A causality that establishes relations of necessity between discontinuous terms. This is the very discontinuity Lacan names “béance”. However, such *béance* does not invalidate an idea of ontology that is not at work within the position of the substance and identity ideas, but within the refusal of the essential reality of those concepts. Indeed, there is still quite a bit to be discussed on this subject. Those appointments are here to show this quandary cannot be easily wore out.

Anyhow, there is another problem that cannot be avoided. We could see ourselves facing a dangerous kind of *negative theology* disguised as clinical considerations, especially with the insistent repetition of the Lacanian reasons regarding the lost object, the inescapable assumption of the lack, the impossible enjoyment, the empty place of the subject that is never completely embodied; reasons that take us to an ethics of “infinite resignation” at most, as Deleuze used to say about Lacanians (DELEUZE and PARNET, 1996, p. 100). Or yet to a “religious idealization of impossibility”, as Judith Butler affirms on the Lacanian relation between enjoyment and Law. Obviously we could think of it all – but we would be wrong. Wrong for not understanding what Lacan sought when transforming the death drive confrontation into the central axis of the analytical progress.

This strategy of reconfiguring the death drive in the clinic can only become clearer if we take into consideration the problem of the status of negations in Lacanian praxis. One should recall, for instance, that the modes of the subject relation to the drive proposed by Lacan do not refer to that which Freud defined as the drive binding to object representations, even if Lacan insisted on the need to think of what could occupy the position of the drive’s “object” (although the very idea of object in this context forfeits its character of what is constituted from binding principles provided by the self as synthetic unity).

This question takes us to another, strictly connected to the treatment direction. Lacan insists constantly that subjectivation in the clinic cannot be organized based on the enlarging perspective of the reflective horizon of understanding the consciousness or of reconstituting the synthetic abilities of the I. That is, the subjectivation in the clinic cannot refer to the imperative the triad remembrance, verbalization and symbolization, a triad that guides the Freudian clinic. However, limiting the reflective processes cannot mean complete impossibility of the subject self-position or even the blocking, impossible to be overcome, of the subjective abilities of synthesis; regardless of how

often Lacanians insist that the end of analysis is the emergence of the a irreflective mute enjoyment or yet the emergence of a subjective destitution that results in the abandon of every form of synthetic aspiration of the thought.

A possible understanding of what Lacan has in mind considers the Lacanian theory of negation. Lacan is aware that the specificity of its subjectivation modes is grounded on acknowledging the eminently negative character of the “objects” to which drive connects and *in which the subject ought to recognize itself*. This demonstrates how Lacanian clinic demands a mode of negation that is not plain indication of a non-being, of a deprivation (*nihil privativum*), of the emptiness as sheer absence of determination, of a denial or mode of expelling from oneself that which is against the pleasure principle. It requires a negation mode that is a mode of presence of what remains outside the reflective symbolization and its identification protocols, and it does not necessarily implies some kind of return to the ineffable. For, according to Lacan, who has always linked the analytical cure to the possibilities of self-objectivation of the subjects beyond their objectivation in the Imaginary, *there is only cure where the subject recognizes himself in a negation thought as a presence of what is the essential determination of objects no longer constituted as narcissist images of the I*. There is something deeply Hegelian in such strategy. In Lacan’s case, this point might be clearer if we show that there is a negation that might *reveal the structure of the objects* that are able to satisfy the drive.

### **Anxiety as the manifesting mode of the object**

There are many ways to address the issue of the Lacanian considerations on the constitutive negativity of the drive object. An apparently paradoxical idea, once it is not a given evidence that there are negation modes that are revealing of the structure of the objects of drive. But we can approach such issue through the Lacanian manner of configuring a phenomenon crucial to the analytical clinic as anxiety. A manner quite different from that found in Freudian thought.

As a matter of fact, Freud does present an important articulation between anxiety and life drive, since the neurotic anxiety is clearly linked to the urgency of drive demands. Lacan preserves this articulation.

Already in 1895, when creating the “anxiety neurosis” category, Freud identifies its cause with the impossibility to elaborate (that is, to bind) the accumulation of endogenous excitement of a sexual type. Later on, something on this perspective remains through the statement that in the neurotic anxiety one is afraid of their own libido, since the drive demand is experienced as an internal danger. This scheme provides the basis for anxiety to be defined as the affection linked to the position of a *quantum* of libidinal energy that cannot be used, that is, that cannot be bound to object representations. This allows Freud to connect anxiety and danger emanating from the loss of the link between the drive and everything that emerges as determined object, a relation of drive support wherein the object lacks and that makes the subject to face what Freud names “helplessness” (*Hilflosigkeit*).

Such manifestation of a free libidinal energy is what lies at the core of the canonical definition that links anxiety to a traumatic factor that cannot be destroyed in accordance to the pleasure principle norms. Because: “is just the size of the excitement adding (*Grösse der Erregungssumme*) that transforms an impression in a traumatic factor able to paralyze the pleasure principle action”<sup>12</sup>.

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<sup>12</sup> FREUD, *Gesammelte Werke* vol. XV, op. cit., p. 100.

Lacan begins following this Freudian suggestion that links anxiety to situations of loss of object and enhancing of an unbound libidinal energy. Thus, he states: “When, by reasons of resistance, of defense and other object cancellation mechanisms, the object disappears, that which can remain continues, that is, the *Erwartung*, the direction to its place, the place wherein it is absent, wherein it cannot be anything other than a *umbestimmte Objekt*, or still, according to Freud, other than an object with which we support a relationship of *Löslichkeit*. When we find ourselves in that point, anxiety is the last mode, the radical mode through which the subject keeps supporting their desire relation”<sup>13</sup>.

But the truly original moment in Lacanian reflections on anxiety will occur later on. It concerns the Lacanian aspiration to be linked to a long lasting philosophical tradition that can be clearly found in Hegel, for instance, and that determines the anxiety experiences as the fundamental device of processes of subjective formation. Anxiety indicates the moment when the subject confront himself with something that cannot be articulated by means of binding principles derived from I as synthetic unity. In this sense, it is the central piece to analytical progress once it rids the subject of the narcissist illusions, just as the experience of the death drive is central in the Lacanian view.

In Lacan’s case, such an anxiety formation dimension (that obviously does not exclude a blocking dimension of anxiety) is discussed when the psychoanalyst insists, against his own previous statements and against Freud, that “anxiety is not without object”. Actually, anxiety is a mode of manifesting objects no longer subdued to the structures of space-time categorization typical of the Imaginary. Which is why he insists, throughout his entire seminar dedicated to anxiety, on the need to rebuild the transcendental aesthetic appropriate to the analytical experience, since “there are times of object appearance that throw us into another dimension, different from the one set in experience. It is the strange dimension. Such a dimension could not at all be apprehended as what makes the subject transparent to their own knowledge. Once facing this new, the subject literally vacillates and everything that concerns the primordial subject relation to the effects of knowledge is put into question”<sup>14</sup>.

This dimension of the strange mentioned by Lacan is what Freud has thematized when addressing to the idea of *Unheimlichkeit*<sup>15</sup>. Indeed, Freud was thinking of phenomena that cause anxiety, in which familiar objects and situations appeared unexpectedly outside their natural identity and identification protocols. For instance, if the self image in the mirror suddenly appears no longer as *self* image but as the image of something autonomous from oneself, as if it were the image of a double, then we stand before a *Unheimlichkeit* phenomenon. Usually, situations when the difference between subject and object is questioned, as if there were some kind of acting subject where one would expect to find nothing but an inert object (and vice-versa), also produce *Unheimlichkeit*.

Lacan tends to transform such phenomena into the key to determine the forming role of anxiety. He understands those phenomena as mode of appearance of objects that are not subdued to naturalized protocols of identity, difference and opposition, and that, for that reason, mix together the safe distinctions between subject and object, oneself and the other, identity and difference. Thus, when stating that such appearances make the structures of the subject relation to knowledge vacillate, Lacan tries to show how the appearance of objects that question the general principles of understanding – such as

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<sup>13</sup> LACAN, Jacques; *Séminaire VIII*, Paris : Seuil, 2001, p. 249.

<sup>14</sup> Idem, *Séminaire X*, Paris : Seuil, 2004, pp. 73-74.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. FREUD, Sigmund; *Das Unheimliche*, Gesammelte Werke vol. XII. Op. cit., pp. 227-268

identity and differentiation principles – lead the subject to rendering fragile the organized images of the world and oneself. But such objects, for bringing with them the negation of their own submission to identity, may put the general principles of knowledge at risk.

That is a central issue. When Lacan labels such objects as what satisfies the (death) drive, a satisfaction weirdly marked with anxiety, it is due to the fact that the negativity of the death drive can be satisfied in the enjoyment of an object that brings in itself its own negation, which is self destruction, twist of its identity protocols (protocols that Lacan sees strongly linked to the order of the Imaginary).

However, it is a fact that speaking of an object that brings its own negation in itself seems only a vaguer way to say we stand before an empty object that has no concept (*nihil negativum*), that is, nothing more than a contradictory object. In this manner, the Lacanian consideration about the death drive as a device for directing the treatment is dependent on an idea of objects that does not reduce the figure of the self-negation of identity to the status of an empty object with no concept. An idea that determines the object essentiality as that which is marked by a negativity whose appearance is always a source of anxiety, once it renders fragile the organized images of the world and the self. A highly Hegelian issue, so it seems.

### **The Hegelian grammar of the Lacanian negation: from death metaphysic to death phenomenology?**

It was discussed above how the Lacanian clinic demanded a specific theory of negation by privileging the death drive concept. Now we realize who such a theory asks for a negation idea that is able to determine objects that are not adequate to the image or the formalization by means of representations. Such negation has here an ontological status once it is the manifesting mode of that which is determined as essence.

Indeed, the idea of a negation as an ontological mode of presence of what is essential in the objects of experience could be found in the dialectic tradition, especially in Hegel's *The Doctrine of Essence*. For according to Hegel the negative is not a lack of determination nor a positive in itself that emerges as the negative only within an opposite relation. On the contrary, Hegel's biggest effort was to think of a *negative an sich*, beyond its opposition to the positive. Restituting the ontological dimension to the negative through the negativity of an essence that must take the form of the object and still preserve its negative character – that might indicate the real sphere of Hegel's influence on Lacan.

Some chapters of the conflictive relationship between Lacan and Hegel are known. It is a relationship made of divergences and misunderstandings, as it would be a relationship to a "Wrong, yet living Hegel", to use a successful formula made up by the Brazilian philosopher Paulo Arantes. Nevertheless, beyond this formula, one should attend to the Hegelian grammar of Lacanian negation, something that does not imply an unconditional agreement with the consequences of the Hegelian system. In this sense, some of the central points in the Lacanian project are could be said to be: *a)* to transform the theory of drives in theory of drive; *b)* to transform the negation typical of the death drive into an ontological negation, negation that is the manifestation mode of essence; *c)* to demonstrate how this negation could determine objects whose manifestation happens under the effect of anxiety. Those objects determined by negation are set as decentralized objects for bringing in themselves the negation of their submission to identity.

Indeed, there would be several manners to approach a possible proximity between Lacan and Hegel on the concept of negation. Probably the best way to consider the approximation of the Lacanian and Hegelian negation theories is a detailed discussion on the Hegelian idea of “negation *an sich*” and its function as a polemical piece against the Kantian concept of real opposition, a concept that points as an empty object, with no corresponding concept, anything negative *an sich*. However, this discussion would take us to another extensive development that could not fit the limits of this article<sup>16</sup>.

But here we could remember this central phenomenological notion of Hegel’s negation, that is to say, death. When Hegel approaches “death” he thinks at first of the phenomenological manifestation that is typical of the phenomenal indetermination of what is never sheer being. That is, a death that indicates an experience of what is not subdued to the self-identical limitations of the representative thinking, a death that stands for that which is not subdued to the determination of the self. According to Hegel, there is a confrontation experience with the indeterminate, with a point where the pure thinking of the self cannot project its own image, which is the equivalent of death. A death that is not the plain destruction of consciousness, nor a plain shattering (*zugrunde gehen*), but is a manner of going to the ground (*zu Grund gehen*). The movement of going to the ground that has no content, as well as the Lacanian death drive does, to impulse the object determination in which the consciousness recognizes its own negativity. Hence Hegel claiming, in the *Science of the Logic*: “The essence, whereas is determined as ground, is determined as the not-determined (*Nichtbestimmte*) and is nothing but the overcoming (*Aufheben*) of its determined being (*Bestimmtseins*), which is its determining”<sup>17</sup>. Regarding this articulation between death negativity and ground experience, there is a crucial moment in the *Phenomenology of the Spirit* Lacan was sensitive to, the moment in which consciousness experiences anxiety within the Master - Slave dialectic:

This consciousness has felt anxiety, not because of this or that particular thing nor at this or that particular moment, but through its whole essence, for it has felt fear of death, of the absolute lord. Then it dissolved interiorly, it was completely shaken and everything solid and stable has vacillated. Nevertheless, this pure universal movement, the absolute melting of everything enduring, is the simple essence of the self-consciousness, the absolute negativity, the pure being-for-self that is so in *this* consciousness<sup>18</sup>.

This part might reveal its actual focus if we remember that, according to Hegel, the essence is not a self-identical substance that determines the modes of being possibilities. The essence is the accomplishment of a reflecting movement. In this sense, contrary to the being that sought its fundament in stable determinations, the essence is set as reflective and relational determination. In other words, essence is the unification of this reflective movement of putting its being in another, splitting and coming back to itself from this position. Whence Hegel claiming that when the being finds itself determined as an essence, it emerges as a being that is in itself negation that denies everything determined and finite, or yet, as being that mediates with itself through the negativity of itself. In this sense, Hegel insists that to internalize the negation of itself

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<sup>16</sup> On this subject, I take the liberty to recommend the reading of SAFATLE, *Linguagem e negação em Hegel in Dois Pontos*.

<sup>17</sup> HEGEL, G. W. F., *Wissenschaft der Logik II*, Frankfurt : Suhrkamp, 1986, p. 81.

<sup>18</sup> Idem, *Phänomenologie des Geistes*, Hamburg : Felix Meiner, 1988, p. 134

must manifest initially as absolute negativity facing the endurance of every determinateness.

It is in this sense that anxiety ought to be understood as the initial phenomenological manifestation of this essence that can only be set through the “absolute melting of every endurance”, that is, through negating the essentiality of every determinateness anchored in opposite identities. An initial manifestation, which is why Hegel speaks of “simple essence”, and yet an absolutely necessary manifestation. Anxiety here may bear this function because it is not about trembling before this or that particular thing nor this or that particular moment; it is about rendering completely fragile its connections to the world and to the self image. This rendering fragile translates precisely what is at stake in this “fear of death, of the absolute lord”. The term “anxiety” here has a successful usage, for it indicates exactly this existential position in which the subject seems to lose every link of desire to an object, as if we stood before a desire that is no longer shapeless. However, if the consciousness is able to understand the anxiety it felt when realizing its world and its language are becoming more fragile as the first manifestation of the spirit, of this spirit that only manifests itself destroying every stable determinateness, then the consciousness may understand that this “path of despair” is, at bottom, internalization of the negative as essential determination of essence. Which is why: “fear of the lord is the beginning [but only the beginning] of wisdom”<sup>19</sup>. A wisdom described by Hegel as the following:

Death – if that is how we wish to call this non-actuality – is the most terrible thing; and clinging to what is dead requires maximum strength. The strengthless beauty hates the understanding for asking of it what it cannot accomplish. However, the life of the spirit is not that which fears death and remains untouched by devastation, but rather it is life that stands death and remains itself in it. The spirit only reaches its truth when it finds itself in absolute dilaceration. It is not this power as the positive that drifts away from negative – as when saying of something to be nothing or to be false, we annihilate it and pass on to a different subject. On the contrary, spirit only is this power once it faces the negative directly and lingers by its side. This lingering is the magical power that converts the negative into being<sup>20</sup>.

When stating that the life of the spirit is the life that stands death and remains in it, Hegel means the spirit is able to internalize and preserve the negation of what is not subdued to the world organized by representation and grounded by the self-identical form of the self. Internalizing here means nothing other than memorizing. What the spirit always tries to forget is not only its historical process of formation, but what moves it, that is, negation as a force that renders fragile the images of the world and the deeply rooted systems of social practices of action and justification. Thus, memorizing is not only the internalization of the negative, but its transformation into being, provide it with objective determination. But memorizing this negation that emerges as death is only possible if the thinking abandons the representation primacy, together with its stable protocols of identity and difference and its refusal of the ontological negation reality.

In *Phenomenology of the Spirit* death is never referred to as abstract negation of consciousness – on the contrary, it is always this fundamental dispossession point for the subject to experience an otherness internal to the self. That happens because there is

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<sup>19</sup> HEGEL, G. W. F., *Phänomenologie des Geistes*, op. cit., p. 135

<sup>20</sup> Ibidem, p. 26

a level of negation which is always how non-identity is set and the realm of objective determinations is reconfigured. We could recall, for instance, how Dubarle has clearly pointed that the term valued as nothing cannot be found in the Hegelian doctrine of Concept<sup>21</sup>. This is because according to Hegel the negated term never reaches the value of zero, since Hegel criticizes this zero function for being an “abstract nothing” (*abstrakte Nichts*). In this sense, Hegelian interest on the infinite calculus is linked to how he structures his understanding of denial as an impulse *to the limit* of determinateness. Hegelian negation never reaches value zero because it takes nothingness *to the limit of the emergence* (*Entstehen*) and takes the being *to the limit of disappearance* (*Vergehen*). Actually, it is the exposure of this movement in which the being is *disappearing* (or *fading*, if one wishes to dialogue with Lacan) and in which nothingness is *manifesting itself* in a determinateness. A movement whose exposition demands another understanding of what is an object, beyond the idea of the object as the stable pole of identity. And it is to this point that Lacan and his considerations on the drive seems to be taking us.

– Translated into English by Luísa Torrano.

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