The Unconscious Freedom of Our Libidinal Economy, or, Existentialism After Freud

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The unconscious wrench

The libido does not strike anyone as the realm of freedom. We experience libidinal drives as if they drive us, not as if we freely choose them. The male inability to control erection functions as a synecdoche for the absence of libidinal freedom. Just as men cannot have an erection on demand (or get rid of it), no one can will themselves to sexual desire.[1] Our sexual desires strike us as if an alien took over our conscious will and directed it regardless of our wishes. This constraint that accompanies the libido renders it an unlikely site for constituting the subject's freedom. The libidinal economy functions more determinatively than the material economy, which itself constrains what is possible through its laws of exchange. And yet it is my claim that freedom is inextricable from unconscious sexuality – that the libidinal economy is actually the realm of freedom. As subjects, we are unconsciously free. The constraint in the unconscious is freeing because it pulls the subject out of its social context and gives it breathing space from the external constraints of this situation.[2] Libidinal economy frees subjectivity from its social determinations.

Even though Freud discovers the unconscious, associating it with freedom cuts against his own conception. Freud is, unapologetically, a psychic determinist. His most extensive discussion of psychic determinism occurs in the *Psychopathology of Everyday Life*. Here, he identifies this determinism with the unconscious while re-

1 For Saint Augustine, male lack of control over erection is the indication of original sin. Although Augustine has no conception of freedom, he does theorise lust in terms of an absence of control.

2 Alain Badiou suggests an opposition between situation and event. The situation, for Badiou, is the realm of unfreedom, the normal existence in which one follows social determinations. The event marks the point of disruption of the everyday, the point at which freedom explodes on the situation. Thus, fidelity to the event is the only possible freedom in Badiou's theoretical universe.

serving freedom for conscious acts. Freud insists that the unconscious is the realm of necessity, not freedom. He writes:

> it is not necessary to dispute the right to the feeling of conviction of having a free will. If the distinction between conscious and unconscious motivation is taken into account, our feeling of conviction informs us that conscious motivation does not extend to all our motor decisions…. But what is thus left free by the one side receives its motivation from the other side, from the unconscious; and in this way determination in the psychical sphere is still carried out without any gap.[3]

As Freud sees it, the unconscious determines our acts to such an extent that it leaves no gap in which freedom might emerge. Our conscious will may be free, but our unconscious desire is the realm of unrelenting psychic determinism. The doctrine of the unconscious seems to put all pretensions of human freedom to bed. Or at least that is how Freud understands his doctrine.[4]

It is significant that in his discussion of psychic determinism, Freud discusses freedom in a traditional way, in terms of free will. He sees the conscious belief in free will as compatible with unconscious psychic determinism. Such a belief, according to Freud, simply misses the role that the unconscious plays in structuring how people act. Freedom is necessarily conscious in Freud's conception because it is associated with the capacity to will – the deliberation that results in a thoughtful decision – not with our forms of libidinal satisfaction. He never fully considers the possibility that the unconscious libidinal economy might itself be the site of freedom, that freedom is the product of our unconscious desire rather than our conscious will.

The closest that Freud comes to this position is his theory of an original choice of neurosis. Through this conception, Freud moves towards an association of the unconscious with freedom that he never develops. In *An Autobiographical Study*, he writes, "the localisation of the point of fixation is what determines the *choice of neurosis*, that is, the form in which the subsequent illness makes its appearance."[5] At this point, it seems as if the subject's freedom resides in its unconscious reaction to its

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3 Sigmund Freud, *Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, trans. Alan Tyson, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 6, ed. James Strachey (1901; reis., London: Hogarth Press, 1960), 254.

4 This is not simply Freud's idiosyncratic take on his own discovery. Many proponents of freedom challenge the idea of an unconscious because they are wary of the damage that this agency would do to the cause of freedom. For instance, despite devoting considerable attention to Freud's discoveries (and writing a screenplay about his life), Jean-Paul Sartre rejects the unconscious in order to preserve human freedom. For Sartre, once one concedes that the unconscious exists, the cause of freedom is gone for good.

5 Sigmund Freud, *An Autobiographical Study*, trans. James Strachey, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 20, ed. James Strachey (1927; reis., London: Hogarth Press, 1959), 36.

situation. The phrase "choice of neurosis" suggests a measure of freedom. Through this choice, the subject determines itself rather than accepting what has been imposed on it.

But when he conceives of the psychoanalytic intervention, Freud retreats from this association of the unconscious with freedom. Psychoanalytic treatment becomes, for him, a process of granting the patient some purchase on its unconscious desire. In place of being ruled by unconscious determinism, Freud proposes relating to this determinism through conscious choice. He goes so far as to associate freedom with the conscious ego in opposition to unconscious desire. In this way, Freud turns to a standard definition of freedom that views our unconscious libidinal economy as a problem of determinism that freedom must overcome.

This position receives its clearest articulation in *The Ego and the Id*. Here, the justification for psychoanalytic treatment is the conscious freedom it grants to the ego relative to the subject's unconscious desire. In a footnote to that work, Freud states, "analysis does not set out to make pathological reactions impossible; but to give the patient's ego *freedom* to decide one way or the other."[6] Far from identifying freedom with the original unconscious choice of neurosis, he identifies freedom with the operations of the conscious ego. Here, freedom is, once again, free will.

Freud's identification of freedom with free will represents his turn away from the radicality of his insight into the disruptiveness of the unconscious. It represents his lingering investment in a liberal conception of freedom that actually founders on the psychoanalytic discovery of the unconscious. This is a point where Freud is not Freudian enough. The existence of the unconscious reveals that a psychic determinism drives the decisions of the conscious will. But it also introduces a structure into the psyche that puts it at odds with the social determinants that would shape it. The unconscious is the site of the subject's singular revolt against what the social order would make of it.[7]

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6 Sigmund Freud, *The Ego and the Id*, trans. James Strachey, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 19, ed. James Strachey (1923; reis., London: Hogarth Press, 1961), 50.

7 This is a point that Joan Copjec insists on in *Read My Desire*. According to Copjec, we are never just the product of a social law but also a reaction against it. This reaction emanates from the unconscious. Copjec writes, "The subject is not only judged by and subjected to social laws, it also judges them by subjecting them to intellectual scrutiny; in other words, the subject directs a question, '*Che vuoi?* What do you want from me?' to every social, as well as scientific, law" (*Read My Desire: Lacan Against the Historicists* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1994), 28). This question directed towards the social order about desire is fundamentally an unconscious one, a question marking the defiance of the unconscious relative to the imperatives it encounters.

Everyone, except Victor of Aveyron, is born into a social context.[8] This context makes coercive demands on the subject that attempt to generate conformity to the norms of the social order. But the subject does not straightforwardly adopt the demands the social order places on it. Instead, it relates to these demands unconsciously. The unconscious marks the point at which the subject does not just accede to what society wants. It is a hiccup in the process of social determination.

The unconscious is not the place of reflection. Its automatic form is incompatible with a process of deliberation in which one weighs competing possibilities and ultimately chooses one. This image of careful consideration between different possibilities is not the form of freedom that the unconscious harbours. Instead, it provides a freedom that the subject most often experiences as a compulsion. As the unconscious impels one in a specific direction, one feels powerless against this push. But this drive is an expression of freedom because it follows its logic regardless of external pressures and without the support of any authority figure. Our unconscious responses show no fealty to the powers that be. Instead, the unconscious articulates the subject's singular response to its existential situation. The experience of unconscious freedom feels like necessity, but this feeling of necessity indicates how the unconscious defies any authority that would determine it.

Identifying freedom with the unconscious requires challenging the prevailing conception of freedom in capitalist society. Capitalism's imperatives rely on a liberal conception of freedom for ideological support, a support that a liberal philosophical tradition has been eager to provide.[9] The liberal conception of freedom – freedom as a free will that consciously chooses among various options – fulfils the exigencies of capitalist society. Liberal freedom is ultimately the freedom to choose what one will buy and sell. Its blindness to the capitalist economy's role in determining this buying and selling is integral to its appeal. In contrast, the lack of attention to unconscious freedom, even from Freud himself, is the result of its fundamental incompatibility with capitalist society. The freedom of the unconscious puts a wrench in the functioning of this society. Our libidinal economy prevents the capitalist economy from running without a hitch. This is because libidinal economy drives us to act against our self-interest.

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8 Victor of Aveyron lived outside of the social order until the age of 12, when French villagers discovered him. As a result of this early absence of a social context, he never learned to speak or communicate effectively with humans, despite years of instruction.

9 The philosophical tradition of liberal freedom remains vibrant to this day, but its original thinker is John Locke, who locates liberal freedom to do whatever one wants in nature. In the *Second Treatise on Government*, he writes, "The *Natural Liberty* of Man is to be free from any Superior Power on Earth, and not to be under the Will or Legislative Authority of Man, but to have only the Law of Nature for his Rule." John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government* (1690; reis., Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1988), 283. Locke clearly sees freedom as the lack of external constraint on the individual.

The self-interested liberal

The central tenet of the liberal conception of freedom is that individuals must be left alone to pursue their interest. This form of freedom is consonant with capitalist society, in which individual self-interest trumps concerns about the collective. From Jean-Jacques Rousseau to John Stuart Mill to Milton Freidman, defenders of liberal freedom insist on this idea as the bedrock of a free society. As Mill puts it in *On Liberty*, "the only freedom which deserves the name, is that of pursuing our own good in our own way, so long as we do not attempt to deprive others of theirs, or impede their efforts to obtain it. Each is the proper guardian of his own health, whether bodily, *or* mental and spiritual."[10] In this view, freedom is inextricable from pursuing one's own interests. The liberal conception of freedom emphasises free will. The conscious will is free to decide the individual's path without external constraint.

But the liberal conception of freedom never stops to consider where my conception of my interest comes from. It assumes the identity of my self-interest with my subjectivity, as if a subject's self-interest derives immediately from the essence of that subjectivity. In other words, for the liberal, my interest is genuinely my own. This assumption does not hold up under closer examination.

As long as the subject pursues its interests, it accepts the interests that come from social authority. What's in my interest is what the social order deems worthwhile, not what challenges the dictates of this order. If we think about any form of self-interest, this quickly becomes evident. My desire for a high-paying job, a fancy car, a luxury house, or a gold watch originates in what the social order depicts as valuable. By pursuing what I value, I pursue what I have been made to value.

This is why narcissism is never a radical position but always a conformist one. My interest is never initially my own but that of the Other or social authority. This social authority determines where I direct my freedom, which is why liberal freedom is always directed towards bettering my position within the social order rather than defying its imperatives. It aims at what others value, not what others disdain. Pursuing self-interest is always pursuing social success, which is why it is inextricable from conformism.

10 John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty*, in *Utilitarianism and On Liberty* (1859; reis., Malden: Blackwell, 2003), 97. As Milton Freidman puts it, "The heart of the liberal philosophy is a belief in the dignity of the individual, in his freedom to make the most of his capacities and opportunities according to his own lights, subject only to the proviso that he does not interfere with the freedom of other individuals to do the same. This implies a belief in the equality of men in one sense; in their inequality in another" (*Capitalism and Freedom* (1962; reis., Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 195). Although Friedman is much more concerned with defending capitalism than Mill, he nonetheless asserts a very similar conception of freedom, which suggests the link between liberal freedom and the capitalist economy.

Liberalism assumes that subjects find satisfaction by advancing themselves within society. According to this logic, the more status one attains in society, the more satisfaction one has. Liberal freedom manifests itself in social triumphs, such as earning a great deal of money, finding an attractive spouse, or obtaining a respected job. In each case, freedom allows the subject to succeed. Liberal freedom leads to avoiding or overcoming failure by pursuing one's self-interest. Liberal freedom assumes that the subject is driven to succeed.

The liberal assumption is that those with the most material success have access to the most freedom. The wealthy can fly to Fiji at a moment's notice, purchase a new jacuzzi for their second home, or travel to space with Elon Musk. Most of us have pecuniary restrictions on what we can do; the materially successful do not. They enjoy a freedom about which we can only dream. However, this conception of freedom fails to consider the libidinal economy of the wealthy. Our libidinal economy does not satisfy itself through triumphs such as buying a mansion but through obstacles and failures, which is precisely what great wealth enables one to avoid.

Liberal freedom is also the freedom to fail. If there were no failures, the freedom to succeed would have no significance.[11] But failure represents a setback that the self-interested person tries to avoid. Failure stems from the limits on freedom, marking a point where freedom cannot fully determine the course of subjectivity. Even though it does not always realise it, liberal freedom exists only insofar as it strives for success.

One's successes are not the source of satisfaction within the psychic libidinal economy. This is what is most counterintuitive about this economy. The pleasure of success is fleeting compared to the satisfaction of the obstacle and the struggle it inaugurates. In this sense, the psychic economy runs contrary to the capitalist economy, just as it runs contrary to the liberal conception of freedom. The libidinal economy runs on the subject's failures, not its successes. These failures are paradoxically also the sites of the subject's freedom. We are only free at the moments when our unconscious acts subvert our conscious will.

I am free only when I choose against my own interest, when I pursue a direction that defies my own self-interest. In other words, freedom exists at the antipode of the liberal conception. This is because my interest is always the product of external

11 The apostles of liberal freedom all insist on the importance of allowing people to make poor choices and to fail. The freedom to fail is the necessary correlate of the freedom to succeed, which is the liberal doctrine. As Milton Friedman puts it, "Those of us who believe in freedom must believe also in the freedom of individuals to make their own mistakes. If a man knowingly prefers to live for today, to use his resources for current enjoyment, deliberately choosing a penurious old age, by what right do we prevent him from doing so?" (*Capitalism and Freedom*, 188). Failures provide the incentive that help to drive everyone else in the direction of success, which is why someone such as Friedman cannot avoid discussing this apparent downside of liberal freedom.

forces that erect it as an illusion that guides my conscious actions, but that fades whenever I approach it too closely. For instance, if I identify my own interest with obtaining a million-dollar salary, it is clear, first of all, that this image of self-interest is not my own. It comes from the capitalist society in which I exist. I have merely taken over the idea of self-interest that this society broadcasts everywhere nonstop. It is thus pathological, in the sense that it derives from an external agency.[12] This apparent self-interest is not my own.

But this is only the beginning of the problem with the liberal conception of freedom to follow one's self-interest. The liberal freedom to follow one's self-interest leads inevitability to disappointment. It founders on its own moments of success. When I finally obtain the salary I want, I will not find the happiness I expect. Instead, I will imagine happiness in earning two million dollars per year or maybe no longer having to work. Whatever image I construct of my self-interest will always suffer from this deficit: the attempt to realise it will expose it as an illusion that will necessitate constructing another image.

Without self-interest as a genuine possibility, the liberal conception of freedom falls apart. The absence of interest as motivation gives the subject nothing to pursue. The liberal subject is cast adrift without any mooring. Mill makes this dependence explicit in *On Liberty*, but every thinker evoking liberal freedom must rely on it. Once we strip self-interest away, our conception of freedom must look beyond the liberal horizon.

Immanuel Kant was the first genuinely to break with the liberal conception of freedom. For Kant, freedom does not consist in advancing one's own interest or procuring one's own self-interest but in precisely the opposite direction. One attests to the actuality of freedom only through suspending one's interest to follow the moral law. The law's fundamental restriction of interest plays a necessary role in the constitution of freedom. Without self-limitation through giving itself the moral law, the subject would never emerge as free. As Kant sees it, there is no freedom without radical self-restriction.

Kant complicates the straightforward liberal conception of freedom by introducing the detour of the law's restriction. He understands that my own self-interest is actually foreign to me, the result of an imposition by an external logic that prioritises it. The law asserts my freedom by stripping away the priority of this intruder and thereby enabling me to grant priority to the law that is in me but functions as an internal constraint on my will or inclination. As Kant puts it in *Critique of Practical Reason*, "freedom, the causality of which is determinable only through the law,

12 Immanuel Kant defines the pathological as those considerations that arise from external circumstances and serve to block the subject's ethical activity. For Kant, even perfectly normal attitudes such as filial devotion or patriotism could have a pathological function insofar as they do not emerge out of the subject's own self-relating.

consists just in this: that it restricts all inclinations, and consequently the esteem of the person himself, to the condition of compliance with its pure law."[13] Although the law restricts, this restriction frees the subject from its dependence on the illusion of self-interest or the compulsion of external determinants.

But because Kant has no theory of the unconscious, he cannot grasp the full radicality of his insight. He identifies the moral law with freedom, but he ultimately aligns free adherence to the moral law with the subject's ultimate interest. In the last instance, the defiance of one's own interest leads back to a greater self-interest, when God rewards the subject for its moral choices. Kant cannot do without this incentive for morality. Without it, freedom would lead to unhappiness, and we would have no incentive to pursue it. In this way, Kant's inability to theorise the unconscious – or, to say it differently, his inability to fully accept the reality of satisfaction in unhappiness – causes him to retreat from freedom back to self-interest. Kant gives ground to liberalism when he imagines happiness as a reward for the moral subject's free choices.

Driven to tears

It would require Freud to add the next crucial turn of the screw to Kant's formulation of the relationship between the subject and its own interest. With his discovery of the death drive in 1920, Freud conceives of a subject that finds satisfaction in its failures rather than its successes.[14] But Freud hints at it well before 1920. This conception of satisfaction in the libidinal economy is present in Freud's initial theory of the unconscious in *Studies on Hysteria* in 1895. From the moment he first theorises it, the unconscious, like the Kantian moral law, undermines the subject's self-interest to provide satisfaction for the subject. For Freud, to say that the subject has an unconscious is to say that it is not a purely self-interested entity. The unconscious is how the subject derails itself.

Although he has no intention to build on Kant's legacy, Freud does precisely that when he conceives of the unconscious as the foundational psychic agency, especially as he theorises it in his later years after discovering the death drive. The unconscious acts against the subject's interest. It satisfies itself through its subversion of the subject's conscious self-interest. Its satisfaction transcends all mean egoism. Although it is not solely an ethical agency, the unconscious never leaves the subject free to act

13 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, *in Practical Philosophy*, trans. and ed. Mary J. Gregor (1788; reis., NY: Cambridge UP, 1996), 203.

14 Freud first articulates the idea of the death drive in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* in 1920 and then attempts to delve into its implications for the rest of his life. But he never reaches an understanding of it that he himself finds totally satisfying.

purely in self-interest. Its grounding principle is the satisfaction that derives from failure, not success.

When the unconscious manifests itself, it often spells trouble for the social prospects of the subject. Unconscious desire undermines conscious wishes. On the most basic level, an unconscious slip can reveal a desire at odds with what one consciously hopes to accomplish. Say I try to advance my interest by complimenting my boss for the sake of a promotion. But instead of stating, "I really liked your presentation in the meeting," I say, "I really liked your ejaculation in the meeting." Rather than obtaining the promotion I hoped for, I may be sent to sexual harassment training or fired. The slip has the effect of subverting what I wish would happen.

But the slip, the manifestation of the unconscious, not what I consciously wish for, expresses my freedom. While the slip undermines my prospects for employment, it simultaneously asserts the distance that separates me from the social imperatives that swirl around me. The slip expresses my defiance of what my social context would make of me, my refusal to simply obey. By engaging in the slip, I affirm the singularity of my subjectivity. The slip indicates my inability to be exactly what the social order would make of me.

Fortunately, not every expression of unconscious freedom leaves me facing sexual harassment charges or unemployed. But freedom does always have the effect of damaging me in some way. There is no freedom outside of self-destruction.[15] In the self-destructive act, I cut into my social position and undermine what the social order has made of me. The free act does not give the subject something additional but takes something away. It occurs at odds with the subject's self-interest, which the subject puts up as a barrier to its freedom.

Libidinal economy works against self-interest. It produces the satisfaction that sustains the subject through the continual sacrifice of the subject's own interest. In the psychic economy, this is the only function that self-interest has. I do not pursue it; I sacrifice it to satisfy myself. This satisfaction frees us from our dependence on the lure of self-interest by exposing its nullity. Only by sacrificing my own interests can I recognise their illusory status that compels us as long as we pursue them.

Freedom is identical to the subject's satisfaction. When the unconscious manifests itself against self-interest, it asserts the subject's freedom. This assertion satisfies the subject by recapitulating the loss that founds subjectivity. The subject emerges through a loss that gives it something to desire. Without this loss, the

15 No film has depicted the connection between freedom and self-destruction like David Fincher's *Fight Club* (1999). When watching the film, it is almost impossible to believe that it survived the rigid censorship of Hollywood system, which attempts to bring the disruptions of the unconscious back into an ideological narrative. For an unequalled discussion of the film's radicality, see Anna Kornbluh, *Marxist Film Theory and Fight Club* (NY: Bloomsbury, 2019).

subject is nothing at all, which is why it can find satisfaction only by losing, never by attaining its object. There is no original object to obtain or to desire: subjectivity loses its object into existence and gives itself something to desire by sacrificing. Through failure, the subject actualises the structuring loss that defines it and constitutes an absent object to enjoy. Failure is the only way we have available to us to give ourselves something to enjoy. The pleasure of success, in contrast, is always fleeting. This is why sports champions always talk about the possibilities for the next year immediately after winning this year's championship. Winning leaves one bereft of an object to enjoy, so one must conjure it by recalling what one does not have.

The problem is that the structure of consciousness is absolutely opposed to the subject's form of satisfaction. No one can consciously pursue failure without transforming failure into success. This is what Blaise Pascal is getting at when he claims that "all men seek to be happy. This is without exception, whatever different means they use. They all strive toward this end.... The will never takes the slightest step except toward this object. This is the motive of every action of every man, even of those who go hang themselves."[16] Pascal is undoubtedly correct when we think purely about conscious will: we strive to realise our self-interest and achieve happiness. But the subject is not just a conscious being. Because Pascal could never read Freud, he could not take stock of the existence of an unconscious that aims at undermining happiness rather than promoting it.

Even when we recognise the existence of the unconscious, we cannot consciously pursue loss in the way the unconscious does. By hanging myself, to cite Pascal's example, I consciously aim at realising my self-interest and relieving myself of the pain of existing. No matter how extreme the act, including suicide, I cannot consciously accede to the aims of the unconscious. I can never consciously take up my unconscious freedom. The unconscious acts freely prior to the intrusion of consciousness, which always lags. Because consciousness pursues self-interest, my conscious will can never be free in the way the unconscious is.

If we are unconsciously free, then freedom is radically opposed to free will. Free will is determined. Freedom appears not through deliberation and decision but in our actions that express the unconscious. We do not consciously guide these actions. Instead, we experience our unconscious acts as compulsions. We experience our freedom only as an inability to do otherwise. When acting unconsciously, we act against our conscious will. Through the unconscious, I assert my freedom from both external constraint and the constraint of my self-interest, which is nothing but an illusion that I have taken over from external forces.

16 Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, trans. and ed. Roger Ariew (1670; reis., Indianapolis: Hackett, 2005), 181.

The most that consciousness can do in the face of our unconscious freedom is to acknowledge its priority and identify the unconscious act as an expression of the subject's desire. It must try to catch up with a freedom that always remains ahead. Most of the time, we disavow our free acts as missteps that we endeavour to correct through subsequent repair efforts. For instance, we tell our lover that we did not mean to call them by the name of our ex-lover. Nevertheless, the misstep is the fundamental form of freedom because freedom is located in the unconscious rather than in our conscious control. The only part that consciousness has to play in freedom is accepting our unconscious acts as the manifestation of freedom.

Insofar as everyone has an unconscious, everyone is free. But psychoanalysis's psychic and political lesson is that one must reconcile oneself to one's freedom. My free acts occur before I have consciousness of them. They appear to me as aberrations that threaten to detour my secure existence. Consciousness can never catch up to these free acts and articulate them. It always comes after my freedom. But I must look at these threats that the unconscious poses to my security as the form that my freedom takes and reconcile myself to its fundamental disruptiveness. The unconscious leads the way for the subject by exploding the illusion of the good that guides its conscious activity.

Free capitulation

Not every irruption of the unconscious affirms the subject's break from its social determinants. That is, the unconscious is not inherently a radical agency in the psyche. The unconscious is not inherently Robespierre or Lenin. This would seem to complicate the link between the unconscious and freedom. However, if we examine our unconscious forms of obedience, it becomes clear that even these manifestations of the unconscious bespeak the subject's freedom insofar as they do not just directly follow the social situation out of which they emerge.

There are moments when our unconscious aligns with our society's superegoic injunctions. The superego is social authority internalised, the psychic agency responsible for social authority's power over the subject. Although most people have a conscious sense of morality, the superego is primarily unconscious, which is why it is such a demanding psychic force. While we may become consciously aware of its injunctions, their source remains unconscious. When we heed the injunctions of the superego, following the unconscious is a form of obedience to the social order, a mode of conformity. The role of the unconscious in the superego indicates that the unconscious is not simply an agency of defiance, not simply a site of psychic radicality. It does not only disrupt our insertion into the social order but can facilitate it when it harbours superegoic imperatives.

When subjects capitulate to superegoic imperatives, they do more than just obey. They take their obedience further than is socially necessary. They take their obedience to the point where they derive enjoyment from their capitulation. The enjoyment that the superego produces is the enjoyment of excessive obedience, an obedience that goes beyond what any authority demands of us.[17]

External authorities require only a certain degree of capitulation – one must wear a suit to work, say, or own a smartphone – and then do not make any additional demand after one obeys to this extent. These authorities leave people free after they capitulate enough – for instance, no external pressure compels one to purchase ten phones for oneself. The superego is much more exigent. The more one gives in to it, the more that it demands one gives.

Freud notices this unrelenting force of the superego as an unsurmountable difficulty when one tries to quench its thirst for obedience. As he theorises the superego in *Civilisation and Its Discontents*,

> the more virtuous a man is, the more severe and distrustful is its [the superego's] behaviour, so that ultimately it is precisely those people who have carried saintliness furthest who reproach themselves with the worst sinfulness. This means that virtue forfeits some part of its promised reward; the docile and continent ego does not enjoy the trust of its mentor, and strives in vain, it would seem, to acquire it.[18]

The superego places the subject in a no-win situation. One can never obey enough to appease its exigency. It does not just demand capitulation but always demands even more capitulation.

The unrelenting nature of the superego derives from its relationship to the death drive. Superegoic imperatives use the subject's self-destructiveness as a disciplining mechanism. The superego transforms the self-destructiveness of the drive into a force that serves the social authority. Under the compulsion of the superego, the subject enjoys its excessive obedience. The subject punishes itself for its failures while getting off on this punishment, like the medieval monk flagellating himself for his transgressions – or someone today upbraiding herself for spending too much time unproductively watching videos rather than studying or working. Here, the subject's self-laceration, which otherwise works against social authority, operates in service of this authority thanks to the superego. When the unconscious expresses itself in

17 Jacques Lacan identifies the imperative of the superego with the command to enjoy. Although it is an agency of restriction that appears moralising, the superego drives the subject to enjoy itself.

18 Sigmund Freud, *Civilisation and Its Discontents*, trans. James Strachey, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 21, ed. James Strachey (1930; reis., London: Hogarth, 1961), 125–126.

the superego, it seems to function as a site of capitulation rather than defiance, of unfreedom rather than freedom.

But even our unconscious adherence to the superego marks a moment of freedom. When unconsciously following the superego's imperatives, we do obey the social demand through these actions. Nonetheless, enthralled by the superego, my capitulation to the social authority is never simply capitulation. When I follow the superegoic injunction, I transform what the social order demands of me into my own form of enjoyment, as much as when I defy this authority unconsciously. The superego misinterprets external social authority in the same way that my desire misinterprets the desire of the Other. This is why I am responsible for my superegoic capitulation, even though the superego is the internalisation of social authority. Although the superego is an agency of conformity and ethical turpitude, it nonetheless is a site of freedom when it manifests itself unconsciously, which is almost the only form the superego takes. Following the dictates of the superego represents a free capitulation. Its link to the unconscious is its link to freedom.

The limits of finitude

The thinker most committed to freedom in the twentieth century contends that any conception of freedom depends on rejecting the unconscious. Jean-Paul Sartre devotes his primary philosophical work to an insistence on human freedom. As Sartre sees it, our freedom has its basis in the orientation that we give to our entire existence. If we have an unconscious, then this orientation ceases to be free and becomes the result of a force outside our control. Positing the unconscious imperils freedom because it eliminates responsibility.

This is not to say that Sartre is utterly hostile to psychoanalysis. Towards the end of *Being and Nothingness*, he proposes his own version of it, "existential psychoanalysis." The problem with this coinage is that existential psychoanalysis strips away the most radical (and essential) piece of psychoanalytic thought – the unconscious. Sartre has to rid subjectivity of the unconscious to preserve freedom due to his conception of the unconscious as alien to subjectivity.

When he discusses Freud in *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre clarifies that the unconscious, as he understands it, is not part of the I or subjectivity. He writes, "by the distinction between the 'id' and the 'ego,' Freud has cut the psychic whole into two. I am the ego but I am not the id. I hold no privileged position in relation to my unconscious psyche. I am my own psychic phenomena in so far as I establish them in their conscious reality."[19] What bothers Sartre about Freud's conception of

19 Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (1943; reis., NY: Washington Square Press, 1956), 50.

the unconscious is that it marks a point at which the subject is not itself, a point at which the subject is not responsible for itself – and thus not free. For Sartre, understanding our libidinal economy in terms of the unconscious implies ceding control of subjectivity to an alien force and abandoning the possibility of the subject's self-determination.

The problem of freedom appears to doom once and for all the idea of a marriage between psychoanalysis and existentialism. The former appears as a philosophy of psychic determinism in contrast to the latter's insistence on freedom. But these two theories have much to offer each other. Existentialism reveals to psychoanalysis that its interventions must concern the subject's freedom, while psychoanalysis shows existentialism that it must locate freedom within the unconscious rather than confining it to consciousness. In this sense, each theory moves the other past a fundamental stumbling block. Existentialism pushes psychoanalysis past its psychic determinism, and psychoanalysis demonstrates that existentialism cannot confine its conception of freedom to conscious decisions.

Instead of conceiving the psychoanalytic critique of the consciously free subject as a refutation of existentialism, we can see it as a way of reformulating existentialism that takes the priority away from consciousness and moves it to the unconscious – creating an existentialism based on the libidinal economy. Existentialism that gives priority to the unconscious appears to betray the fundamental tenet of existentialism – my free decision. But the essential problem with existentialism lies in its focus on consciousness. This focus prevents it from taking stock of not only unconscious desire but also the power of ideology to determine conscious decisions.[20] When we turn to the unconscious as the paradoxical site of freedom, the response to the problem of ideology becomes much clearer and a more defensible conception of freedom emerges.

The split between consciousness and the unconscious as a starting point entails a divide between focusing on the finitude of the subject and its infinitude. The notion of our inherent finitude unites existentialist thinkers even when they disagree on what constitutes it. For instance, finitude marks a critical disagreement between

20 In his critique of Sartrean existentialism, Herbert Marcuse contends that the philosophy of freedom becomes an ideology itself when it completely obliterates material determinants in the way that Sartre does. Marcuse states, "If philosophy, by virtue of its existential-ontological concepts of man or freedom, is capable of demonstrating that the persecuted Jew and the victim of the executioner are and remain absolutely free and masters of a self-responsible choice, then these philosophical concepts have declined to the level of a mere ideology, an ideology which offers itself as a most handy justification for the persecutors and executioner" ("Existentialism: Remarks on Jean-Paul Sartre's *L'Être et le Néant*," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 8, no. 3 (1948): 322). Existentialism becomes an ideological justification for Marcuse because its conception of freedom writes the material forces of capitalist society out of the picture. Sartrean freedom becomes just a reinvention of liberal freedom.

Martin Heidegger and Sartre. Heidegger theorises finitude in terms of our being towards death: we are finite entities since death limits our possibilities. In contrast with Heidegger, Sartre views death as absolutely alien to subjectivity. He links finitude to freedom. Finitude, for Sartre, is integral to and even follows from our freedom.

I am initially free because I do not have an infinite number of choices. Were I an infinite being, I would be unable to choose and be condemned to unfreedom. My finite situation both limits my freedom and, at the same time, enables my freedom. For Sartre, a freedom without limits is no freedom at all. But then, when I choose, I introduce a limit into my being and produce my finitude. Since there is no escape from choice – I am condemned to freedom – there is no escape from finitude. We are finite because we are lacking beings. Our freedom occurs not through overcoming our lack but through identifying with it. We are free only insofar as we lack. If we were complete, we would cease to be free.

This is another point at which existentialism and psychoanalysis appear to come together perfectly. Sartre's insistence on the lacking subject seems to parallel Lacan's. It is even tempting to claim that Lacan simply plagiarises the lacking subject from Sartre, in whose intellectual shadow he emerges as a theorist. But Sartre's alignment of lack with finitude marks an essential point of divergence. For psychoanalysis, we are lacking beings not because we are finite beings but because we are infinite. This is the point at which psychoanalysis follows the lead of German Idealism rather than phenomenology and points towards a wholly different version of existentialism – an existentialism that takes the unconscious as its point of departure.

We are infinite beings because our desire transcends every empirical object and continues without regard for the passing of time. Our lack is the emblem of desire transcending its object, not of it coming up short. As beings of desire, rather than beings of instinctual need, we find ourselves moved by a force that does not obey the restrictions of the finite world. The infinitude of subjectivity does not respect death as an endpoint.

Of course, psychoanalysis must avow that the subject dies, that it is finite in the sense that Heidegger privileges. Death remains an unsurpassable trauma that annihilates all the subject's freedom. But death traumatises the subject not because the subject is finite but because the subject is infinite. This is a crucial point of distinction. If subjects were nothing but finite beings, their death would be the unremarkable indication of this finitude. But no subject approaches death in this way. We approach it instead as something that we project ourselves beyond, which is why its trauma so impacts us. Our capacity for transcending death and attaching ourselves to a desire that aims beyond the finite world represents the subject's infinitude. This infinitude makes death unbearable for the subject.

The distinction between conceiving the subject as finite or infinite has important implications for how we think of the subject's freedom. A free finite subject always has possibilities that it cannot realise because they lie beyond the limitations of its finitude. The finite situation determines the limits of freedom, even though these limits are fundamentally enabling. Without the situation, without a limitation of freedom, there would be no freedom. But at the same time, the finite subject experiences these barriers to its freedom as injustices.

I live in an area where the only employment opportunities are mining cobalt under horrific conditions or joining a paramilitary group. At the same time, I see other choices like investment banking and corporate law that are utterly closed off to me. My finitude expresses itself through what is not possible for me. The finite subject constantly encounters barriers that make evident its finitude and that make this finitude any everyday reality. These barriers manifest themselves in the form of others (who have the possibilities denied to me) or the Other (the authority that polices the border that keeps me in my situation).

The inherent tendency of the finite subject is to view these others (and especially the Other) as illegitimate barriers to its own potentiality for action. Even though Sartre tells me that my freedom's restrictions are constitutive, I experience these restrictions as unjust. The right of the Other constantly intrudes on the subject and highlights the subject's limit. The prison bars of finitude appear in the form of the Other, causing the subject to lash out at the Other with aggression. While Sartre recognises the necessity of the barrier to freedom that others represent, he nonetheless theorises aggression as one of the fundamental relations to others that result from this barrier

For the infinite subject, the Other has a vastly different role. Lack, here, is not simply impoverishment or limitation but also a possibility. The subject does not run up against the Other's limitation but constantly goes beyond it. It experiences the failure of desire not through the figure of the Other but in the act of desiring itself. If the finite subject tends to be paranoid about the Other, the infinite subject views the Other not just as a limitation but also as a condition of possibility for subjectivity's project.

Sartre contends that the initial presence of others and their projects limit my freedom. My project must emerge against the background of these others that alienate me from myself. He does admit that the limitation of others and the situation they create are necessary. There is, for him, no freedom outside of the situation that limits it. Nevertheless, at the same time, he theorises this limit as exterior to my freedom. It is an external barrier rather than an internal (or internalised) enabling limit. He fails to see that the presence of the Other within me is the starting point of all freedom.

This mistaking of the external barrier for the internal limit stems from the blind spot that haunts Sartre's philosophy and all derivatives of existentialism from the

beginning. The third party is the fundamental absence in existentialism (and phenomenology, its parent). The encounter that the existentialist imagines is an encounter with the other, an encounter that initially occurs without a mediating third. However, the mediating third does not come along after the fact. It is what enables any encounter between subject and other.

Third first

In *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre indicts psychoanalysis for always looking at the subject from the standpoint of the Other (which is necessary to make the unconscious visible). It seems impossible to preserve the idea of the existential project while granting the existence of unconscious desire. But I contend that understanding the existential project as unconscious offers a way to offset some of the more damning critiques of existentialism and formulate an existentialism that grapples with the influence of the Other. Rather than starting with the isolated subject as Sartre does, we can recognise how the mediation of the Other is there from the start. We discover our existential project not through self-reflection but in encounters with otherness when the unconscious manifests itself. The unconscious nature of our existential project forces us to take the Other as the starting point of our existential project.

The main thrust of psychoanalysis, following in the wake of German Idealism, is that the third party is not only in force for every one of the subject's encounters but also that subjectivity emerges through the third party's mediation. The third party – what Kant calls the "transcendental categories," or what Hegel calls "*Geist*," or what Lacan calls the "big Other" – provides the primary point of reference through which the subject takes up its own relation to the world. Freud did not simply identify the third party with the unconscious, as if our unconscious were the direct representative of the Other implanted in the psyche. Instead, our engagement with the third party produces an unconscious irreducible to either the third party (the Other) or the conscious subject.

The existential priority of the third party eliminates the subject as a philosophical starting point, as it is for all existentialist thinkers, including Martin Heidegger (despite his rejection of the term for what he calls *Dasein*). There is not an initial immediate relation to the world that the subject subsequently loses when it encounters the mediating influence of the third party.[21] Instead, the third party plays a formative role in the emergence of the free subject. The subject must relate to itself and

21 From the opposite corner of the philosophical universe, this is also the position of Ludwig Wittgenstein. Wittgenstein stakes out a similar claim when he insists that there is no private language. This is Wittgenstein's way of saying that the third party comes first, that our private feelings find their model in public utterances.

its needs through a mediating third party, which is why its needs transform into unconscious desires.

Desire, or the fundamental project of the subject, is not the result of the subject's original choice that occurs against the background of a series of others and their projects. I do not determine my project through conscious choice. The presence of others does not serve simply to limit my possibilities. Instead, my project is, first and foremost, an act of unconscious interpretation.

The subject arrives at its desire by interpreting the desire of the third party or Other. The Other or social authority does not simply imprint its ideology on me. Instead, I relate to the promulgation of this ideology through how I interpret the ideological injunction.[22] I emerge as a desiring being by an interpretation consonant with how I begin to desire. This alienation of my own desire is absolutely primary. I have no desire outside of an alienated desire of the Other. I have no project that is mine before the project that comes from the Other, a project that I attempt to discover through my interpretive act.

But the central role that the Other plays in my desire's emergence does not eliminate the subject's freedom. Instead, it changes where we locate freedom. My freedom is not found in the act of originating the desire or the project. It is not that I am "free" because I can invent my project out of whole cloth and then work on pursuing its realisation.

My freedom is found, rather, in the act of unconscious interpretation of the Other's desire, an act that occurs in the libidinal economy. Through interpreting the Other's desire, I arrive at my own. Unconscious interpretation is the free act that separates me from the Other. Its freedom consists in its incapacity to be literal. I cannot take what the Other tells me literally because the terms through which the Other signifies its desire are not transparent, even to itself. The opacity of the Other's demand addressed to me activates my unconscious in response. It renders my interpretation of this demand – that is, my desire – free.

No matter how carefully I hew to the Other's project as the Other describes it, I always misunderstand it because the Other does not understand itself. It is impossible for me to simply adopt the Other's desire or project through the act of interpreting it. There is no such thing as perfect obedience, despite conscious efforts. When I interpret, I distort the Other's desire into my own. I am the misreading of what the

22 The problem with Louis Althusser's famous conception of ideological interpellation is that he imagines it working even when it fails. I misrecognise myself as the subject of an ideological hail that is not necessarily intended for me, and this misrecognition constitutes me as an ideologically interpellated subject. Given the structure of the unconscious, however, it would be more correct to say that the ideological hail fails even when it succeeds. My recognition of an ideological hail always skews my relationship to the Other, no matter how much I consciously want to capitulate, because I have an unconscious.

Other desires. My failure to correctly interpret the Other's project is how I assert my freedom.

I get my own freedom right insofar as I get the Other's desire wrong. But this freedom is always ahead of my conscious subjectivity. I must look for it in what escapes my conscious control. When I act as if under compulsion but without following external dictates, I gain a privileged insight into how my freedom looks. Freedom is never deliberative but always takes me by surprise. I am free at the moments when I cannot act otherwise.

Destroying freedom

When he conceives of the unconscious, Freud does not believe he is developing a theory of freedom. On the contrary, he contends that a strict necessity governs the structure of the libidinal economy. He calculates how the psyche functions based on the necessity that governs it, which is one reason why he believes that one day we might discover physiological explanations to replace psychoanalytic ones. But Freud never took stock of how the logic of the unconscious shatters the image of self-interest for every subject. Once we understand how the unconscious satisfies itself through the destruction of our own interest – which Freud began to theorise in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* in 1920 – discovering its association with freedom becomes the next logical step. Freud could not take this step because the only conception of freedom that he had available to him was the liberal one, a freedom that conceptualises freedom in terms of the conscious will. Freud was not a careful reader of Kant and did not read Hegel at all. The result is that he could not identify the subject's annihilation of its own self-interest with the subject's ultimate assertion of freedom.

No social order can privilege genuine freedom for its adherents. To do so would strip away their attachment to the order and pave the way for a constant threat of the order's overthrow. The liberal capitalist order seems to fly in the face of this logic because it thrives on freedom and could not function without a free market that enables producers and consumers to choose the commodities they will produce and consume. The paradoxical conclusion is that capitalism relies on freedom, but freedom embodies the annihilation of any ruling social link. The solution to this riddle lies in exploring the nature of freedom: the freedom that would break from the ruling order is distinct from the freedom of choice that sustains the capitalist system. In fact, capitalist freedom of choice depends on abandoning unconscious freedom, which is the form of genuine freedom and the only possible basis for a political rupture. The oxymoron of unconscious freedom serves as the engine for a political break insofar as it involves a refusal of the givens that determine our situation. Unconscious freedom expresses a libidinal economy that runs counter to political economy, a freedom of desire rather than conscious will. This sort of freedom cannot be

directly conscious and can only become so after the fact. One can identify unconscious freedom only in the form of the event that compels one to act.

The liberal conception of freedom has dominated thinking for so long because it works hand in hand with the illusion that we are self-interested beings. It also aligns with our common sense. It seems completely logical that we are free when we consciously decide to pursue the end that we deem would advance our interests. Preserving this image of freedom has the effect of preserving self-interest as obtainable and worthy of pursuit. Deprived of self-interest, liberal freedom evaporates as well. Freud's discovery of the unconscious points towards a radically different conception of freedom after self-interest proves unsustainable. Unconscious freedom not only survives the death of self-interest but thrives via its sacrifice.

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