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COMMENTARY

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CLARIFICATIONS ON *TRIEB*  
*Freud's Theory of Motivation Reinstated*

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Freud never used the term *instinct* to characterize human motivation, despite continued misrepresentations and commentaries that claim otherwise. Instead he described the process by which unconsciously enlisted variants emanate from their immediate, embodied sentient nature and evolve in both form and content to produce a robustly complex and overdetermined system of human development and social motivation. Freud's drive theory therefore remains the paragon for potentially explaining all facets of intrapsychic and interpersonal phenomena, from the most base and primordial urges of unconscious desire to the most cultivated and exalted dimensions of mind, individuation, culture, and intersubjective life.

Freud's (1915/1946) pivotal work "Triebe und Tribschicksale"<sup>1</sup> continues to be a source of misunderstanding among English-speaking audiences almost a century after it appeared in print. The title is customarily translated as "Instincts and Their Vicissitudes." Not only is this a mistranslation, it inaccurately implies to the reader a set of propositions Freud neither intended to convey nor espoused—namely, that the human psyche, which Freud referred to as the soul (*Seele*), was composed of behaviorally hardwired, physiologically determined instincts that formed the edifice for human motivation and action. *Instinkt* was a word Freud rarely used in the context of the human subject; he reserved it for animal

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<sup>1</sup>All references to Freud's texts refer to the original German monographs compiled in *Gesammelte Werke, Chronologisch Geordnet (GW)*. "Triebe und Tribschicksale" appears in Book X, *Werke aus den Jahren, 1913–1917*. All translations are mine. I have also cited the page numbers to these same texts as they appear in the *Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud (SE; Freud, 1912/1958, 1915/1957)*. References to quotations are designated by *GW* and *SE*, respectively, followed by the appropriate page numbers.

species and loathed it for its simple equation to material reduction: This is precisely why he deliberately chose the word *Trieb*—more appropriately translated as “drive,” “impulse,” or “urge”—to characterize human motivation. Likewise, *Schicksale*, rendered as “vicissitudes,” is equally misleading, because it implies a passionless, staid mechanism of change rather than the dynamic notion of mutability that belongs to the fate or destiny of life experience. This is what Freud had in mind when he envisioned the psyche as a temporal flux of dynamic events that arise from the most archaic fabric of our corporeal nature, which transforms over time through internal mediations we customarily refer to as “defense mechanisms,” itself another unfortunate and misleading aphorism. “Drives and Their Fate” comes much closer to capturing the implied meaning behind the transmogrification of inner forces, a process that extends to the most unrefined and immediate expression or derivative of a drive to the most sublimated aspects of human deed and desire.

In a recent article, “*Triebe* and Their Vicissitudes,” George Frank (2003) offered another challenge to Freud’s thesis on “drives” and claimed, like others before him, that we ought to do away with the term altogether, only to replace it with a “new paradigm” of “needs, affects, beliefs, etc.” (p. 691). Although Frank’s work is thoughtful and in some places conceptually useful—not to mention more readily applicable to the consulting room, especially when discussing with patients their needs, beliefs, desires, and emotionally corresponding associations rather than the language of drives—he nevertheless does not do justice to the abstruse concept of *Trieb*, which in my estimate he waters down to a theory of consciousness, and does not see the logical necessity of Freud’s developmental monistic ontology. What I wish to argue in this short essay is that not only does Freud’s thesis on the nature, activities, and transmutations of the *Triebe* answer to the theoretical conundrum of human motivation that still besets psychoanalysis today, but I will further show that Freud’s concept of drive does not at all contradict competing contemporary models favoring beliefs, needs, wishes, and intentionality. On the contrary, he explains how those processes are made possible to begin with.

Freud’s technical use of *Trieb* is distinguished from the ordinary usage describing an urge, such as a whim or caprice. Rather, *Trieb* is the *driving force* behind the mind compelled and fueled by unconscious desire. Although Freud certainly says that the source (*Quelle*) of a drive is biologically informed, hence it emanates from constitutionally based somatic tension, this is preceded by his emphasis that the “essence” (*Wesen*) of a drive is its pressure (*Drang*), namely, internal experiential activity under the pressure of certain events, events that make themselves felt or known as an urge, wish, desire, or need. It is important to qualify that the source is *not* the motive, as Frank (2003) obfuscated, but only internally derived. Motives, on the other hand, are complex phenomena subject to many intervening and emergent interactive effects both internally mediated and externally influenced. “Although drives are wholly determined by their origin in a somatic source, in the life of the soul [*Seelenleben*] we know them only by their aims” (Freud, 1912/1943, *GW*, p. 216; *SE*, p. 123). Note that Freud says a drive is determined by its “origin” (*Herkunft*), not that all motives are biologically based. The reason Freud logically situates the source of a drive within our biologically determined facticity is simply that we are embodied beings. We are thrown into a body a priori, and hence all internal activity must *originally* arise from within our corporeality mediated by internal dynamics. Here Freud is merely asserting an empirical fact grounded in a natural science framework. Those analysts like Mitchell who wish to abnegate the archaic primacy of the body are simply delusional. As a consequence, many advocates of the American middle group uncritically and naively devalue the importance of embodiment in favor of relational motives but do

so on the basis of extreme polemics and unsophisticated dichotomies that utterly fail to acknowledge the indubitable certainty that relationality is predicated on an embodied unconscious ontology. What is utterly ignored within these circles is that Freud was in fact the first one to pave a theory of object relations and ego psychology that was interpersonally based on the relational motives of the drives. Let me explain, but first let us prepare the discussion.

Freud further analyzed the elements of a drive by examining its aim and its object. The aim (*Ziel*) of a drive is to seek satisfaction, hence pleasure, which is achieved by terminating a state of stimulation. This is the *telos* of a drive, hence its purpose. But unlike the mechanical operations of fixed, predetermined tropisms that are genetically hardwired behavioral patterns belonging to animals and lower organisms, human drives are determinative. That is, they are endowed with a degree of freedom manipulated by the agency of the ego, an ego that operates on manifold levels of conscious and unconscious activity. Freud specifically tells us that the aim of a drive may take different paths with multiple instantiations; it can be inhibited or deflected, which may be in the service of an ultimate aim; or it can achieve “intermediate” endeavors, work in tandem with competing goals, and be combined, coalesce, or merge into a confluence all at once, thus operative on different levels of pressure and meaning (Freud, 1915/1946, *GW*, p. 215; *SE*, p. 122). Of course an aim *needs* an object in order to achieve satisfaction, and this is why Freud says an object (*Objekt*) is the most variable aspect to a drive, the avenue through which a drive is able to procure fulfillment. Furthermore, an object is “assigned,” hence it is not “originally connected” to a drive. In fact an object can be anything, whether in actuality or in fantasy, and can be both extraneous and internal, such as the “subject’s own body” (*des eigenen Körpers*; Freud, 1915/1946, *GW*, p. 215; *SE*, p. 122). Notice how Freud uses the language of subjectivity when describing a drive, and specifically the ego’s mediating activity of satisfying its aim. And the overarching preponderance of objects are mostly people and the functions they serve. Drives desire others; hence relatedness. Here Freud unequivocally accounts for how interpersonal phenomena arise on the basis of the most primordial activities of unconscious desire. Thus, not only did Freud account for a relational theory embedded within the process of drive activity itself, but he shows the logical necessity and developmental progression from intrapsychic to intersubjective life.

Taken as a whole, drives are pure experiential activity. They are not fixed or static behavioral tropisms such as instincts; rather they are dynamic patterns of events that are malleable and flexible instantiations of unconscious occasions. The fate or destiny of a drive is what becomes of its activities, from beginning to end. This is why Freud concludes that *die Tribeschicksale* are different methods of defense or resistance (*als Arten der Abwehr*) against a drive, preventing it from achieving satisfaction of its original unmodified aim because of the competing, overdetermined motive forces at work in the psyche (Freud, 1915/1946, *GW*, p. 219; *SE*, p. 127). Freud’s careful inspection of the activities and attributes of a drive in his 1915 paper are the result of his changing theoretical system. At this time, Freud was working from the premise that drives derive from a libidinous spring, from a *Lust-principle*. Up until then, *Trieb* was used to describe a number of different activities that arose in consciousness that were applied to intentional self-states belonging to the ego, which he called *die Ich-Triebe*, such as wishes, beliefs, actions, propositions, and so forth. Frank (2003) is content to view a drive and a wish as synonymous (p. 692), but this is inaccurate. A wish, belief, or need is a derivative and transformation of a drive, what is typically considered a conscious manifestation from contemporary perspectives. Of course, Freud wanted to account for the presence and ubiquity of unconscious fantasy that takes the form of determinate self-states, such as

beliefs, needs, and propositional attitudes, but only on a prereflective level of self-expression or self-certainty that is somatically and affectively realized. Although Freud (1912/1943) emphasized the notion that “every psychological act begins as an unconscious one” (*GW*, p. 436; *SE*, p. 264), he also showed that through the transformation of the drives, conscious and self-conscious (and hence reflexive) cognition produces various needs, beliefs, and so forth that are the modification of unconscious structure. Therefore, Freud’s 1915 thesis on the nature of a drive is a pivotal step in his move toward his mature theory, where he concludes that mind is an architectonic, epigenetic achievement that evolves from the most rudimentary expression of the dialectic of life and death—hence from the libidinal activity of Eros to the destructive will of *der Todestrieb*—organized within an unconscious it (*Es*) as alien and alienated desire, executed by the agency of the ego, and sublimated through reason, aesthetics, and moral judgment inherent in self-reflective social life. Elsewhere (Mills, 2002a, 2002b), I have argued that Freud is a developmental monistic ontologist because he fundamentally relies on the most primitive aspects of mental activity derived from our sentient, corporeal facticity and shows how such incipient unconscious processes gradually become more differentiated, complex, dynamically organized, and dialectically articulated through self-transformation in *all* domains of human activity as the transfiguration of its nascent embodied nature. Hence Freud is able to show how human subjectivity is predicated on agentic determinacy expressed through the epigenesis of unconscious process as the maturation and actualization of freedom.

Freud’s thesis on drives is the most philosophically sophisticated theory of motivation in the psychoanalytic literature for the simple fact that he begins with our natural immediacy as embodied beings and shows through a complex series of dialectically mediated events how intrapsychic and psychosocial life is made possible, thus giving rise to all psychic phenomena. It is not accurate for critics to clamor that because there are multiply determined needs inherent to human experience, drive theory cannot adequately account for them. I hope from this terse account to have persuaded the reader otherwise. An endemic problem to contemporary modes of discourse is that Freud expositors either misunderstand or ignore the fact that *Trieb* is predicated on *process*, transformation, growth, and refinement. In Freud’s mature model of the mind, he was far from reductionistic, as Frank (2003, p. 695) and others have argued, instead showing how motivation is a supraordinate, overdetermined network that radically resists reductionistic explanations by virtue of the fact that human agency is the teleological expression of its freedom. From my account, the most unsophisticated theoretical positions are those that jettison drive altogether or subordinate it to a meaningless construct. Here I have in mind the relational movement that has not bothered to carefully read Freud’s original German texts and continues to use Freud as a launching pad to mythologically erect straw man arguments at the expense of scholarship and logical rigor. Although the language of needs, beliefs, desires, and affects is central to conducting analytic work, we need not displace the explanatory value and theoretical primacy of the drives but only accommodate them.

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