

# Retrieving the Paradox: Freud's Death Drive and the Originary Concept of Deferral

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## Abstract

In this paper I explore the idea that Freud's death drive, despite having its explanatory status and truth claims questioned, is an anthropologically astute concept that embraces the paradox of symbolic consciousness. Any theory of the human must accommodate the paradoxicality of human thinking, motivations, and cultural forms to generate useful theoretical insights. Even though some critical arguments against it are justified, as I show in my paper, the death drive captures something fundamental about human behavior, which I demonstrate by close-reading a short story, "My First Cousin," by Sergey Dovlatov. In addition, I also argue that the recent attempts to incorporate the death drive into cognitive theories based on predictive processing are not convincing because these theories are not paradoxical and thus miss something that is essential to Freud's metapsychological system. Finally, I argue that the death drive, coupled together with the life drive as a dual-drive model of the psyche, can be derived from the originary concepts of Generative Anthropology, that of deferral. The logic of deferral has the prolongation element that suspends the imminent threat of violence, and thus can be seen as life-preservative. But it must necessarily include the movement of the return to the point of deferral because deferral defers temporarily. Having deferred, we feel pressure on us to release the tension produced by the deferring gesture. I suggest that this direction of movement, which I call *consolidation*, corresponds to Freud's intuition of the death drive. The movement of consolidation is logically reversed and unconscious, but we can detect it in the paradoxical relationship between the narrator and narratee.

**Keywords:** Deferral of violence in GA, paradox, Freud's dual drive theory, the death drive, repetition compulsion, entropy, predictive processing, the free energy principle.

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In recalling the history of Generative Anthropology and its intellectual grounding in the theories of René Girard and Jacques Derrida, Eric Gans says that he wanted to "add the element of paradox to the Girard-Derrida dialectic as the primary constituents to the originary hypothesis" (Gans 2020(a)). By thinking paradoxically, Generative Anthropology

has been able to bridge some disciplinary and philosophical gaps. Thanks to the concept of the oscillation between the communal and individual scene, for example, the minimal hypothesis helps us think beyond the individual monadic mind. The scenic idea gives a helpful and concrete realization to the recognition that we are both inside and outside our minds, entangled with other minds. This inside/outside problematic is captured by other modern existential philosophers, such as in Levinas, under the guise of *the Other*, or as *Mitsein (Being-With)* in Heidegger's existential philosophy, or through Sartre's *being-for-others*.[\[1\]](#)

Another such disjunction that GA can bridge is that between the physical and the mental, or an action and its symbolic representation. This is made possible by the paradoxical phenomenon of desire. Exceeding that of animal appetite, which exists in the material realm of physiological mechanisms, human desire, through its paradoxical structure, opens up the space of freedom, where the first sign can appear. In a way, the fact that GA brings the physical and the mental together is self-explanatory, even tautological. That is what the originary hypothesis aspires to do, in the first place: if not directly "heal" the Cartesian divide between mind[\[2\]](#) and matter, at least bring the two together conceptually from an anthropological perspective. Indeed, GA theorizes that the material process of converting food to energy becomes sidetracked and results instead in an immaterial symbolic system. In other words, a limited energetic resource transforms into an infinitely reproducible system of signs. The paradox that connects the physical and the symbolic is that of *mimetic desire*. Expressed as a logical contradiction, the paradox of desire can be summarized by stating that the fulfillment of one's desire is "possible only under conditions of non-fulfillment" (Gans, 1985, p. 28). In anthropological terms, we can say that the psychological tension of being both attracted to an appetitive object and repelled by its danger (experienced by pre-humans at the moment of mimetic crisis) is resolved by the invention of the sign, which "permits the sharing of the unsharable" (Gans, 2020 (a)). On the animal level of consciousness, this tension is not paradoxical. In fact, paradox does not exist on the physical plane—it is "a property of systems of representation" Gans (2017). The contradiction between desire and its renunciation is solved "on the next level," so to speak. It is solved on the level of symbolic thinking, achieved through the exclusively human phenomenon of deferral. Instead of being more like a distancing arm, deferral achieves a Moebius-strip-like twist in orientation, which I would like to reflect on further in this paper.

The place where I would like to start my investigation is the notion of energy as a convenient abstraction from physics, which theorizes how something actually happens (energy is the ability to perform work). The energy of the appetitive instinct would have been spent on acquiring an appetitive object, which would have been converted to replacement energy for maintaining necessary physiological functions in the organism. By analogy, it would not be far-fetched to think of mimetic desire as having energetic potential: a desire, at least potentially, can result in physical action. Eric Gans has also talked about deferral in terms of energy while, for example, discussing the "creation of a sign-world

outside the temporal experience of the life-world” and writing that language and representation are used “like any deferral of worldly action, to store up energy for the sake of future conflict” (Gans, 2015). When considering the aesthetic paradox (the experience of oscillation between the sign and its referent), Gans states that the “circulation of psychic energy between the original appetitive drive and the “deferred” scene of representation is the source of human creativity” (Gans 2020(b)). Is this just a way of speaking or should the implications of this figure of speech be teased out?

This phrase, namely, *psychic energy*, has strong historical associations with the psychoanalytic vocabulary, and perhaps we can take our cue from Freud, who has conceived his drives or instincts in energetic terms: “the mind . . . must be driven by an energy of some kind,” as summarized by Mark Solms in his article “Revision of Drive Theory” (1036). Although mimetic desire differs from Freud’s drives in that it crosses the barrier from the instinctual to the symbolic realm, they share the underlying conceptualization of being “engine”-like and supplying necessary forces for converting some kind of “inner pressure” to physical action. According to Freud, a drive “appears to us as a concept on the frontier between the mental and the somatic, as the psychical representative of the stimuli originating from within the organism and reaching the mind, as a measure of the demand made upon the mind for work in consequence of its connection with the body” (qtd. Solms, 1034). The “mental” is not explicitly or even implicitly equated with the symbolic here: the question of representation is not thematized.<sup>[3]</sup> Another similarity between Freud’s drives and mimetic desire is that they both operate unconsciously. According to Solms, Freud held the view that drive energies are unconscious in themselves but, on the outer level of perception, they become accessible through affects, which we, however, can mistake, conflate, and misconstrue as to their energetic sources (1044). Mimetic desire, if we adopt a Girardian view, is also unconscious. According to Girard, it is a mechanism, not an act of volition, “a generative . . . principle which works unconsciously in culture and society” (Williams 294). Generative Anthropology, in opposition to Girard’s mimetic theory, puts a premium on the representational aspect of mimetic desire—and indeed, the reason we can talk about it and identify it is because we have conscious access to it, and our consciousness thinks in symbols—but for the sake of my topic, I would like to bring focus to the mechanistic part of it as something preconscious and energetic (as mechanisms are activated by energy).<sup>[4]</sup>

In what follows, I would like to discuss Freud’s idea of the death drive and the understanding of energy that it invites, not only in order to demonstrate its anthropological pertinence and hence Freud’s good anthropological instincts but in order to show how it can add more depth to our understanding of deferral and paradox. Freud’s death drive is a mysterious, anti-intuitive notion, Why would biological organisms, whose expressed purpose is self-preservation, be driven to self-annihilation? How could nature create such a suicidal impulse that goes against life’s celebrated tenacity in the face of natural challenges? My brief review of relevant literature reveals that the death drive, and the drive theory, in

general, have been questioned or neglected (or attempted to be reconceptualised in the light of paradigm shifts in cognitive theory) by psychoanalysts, biologists, and cognitive scientists. For example, Andrew Holowchak and Michael Lavin write in their 2015 paper "Beyond the Death Drive: The Future of 'Repetition' and 'Compulsion to Repeat' in Psychopathology": "Whatever the ultimate status of Freud's final dual drive theory,[\[5\]](#) until it is reworked at length, it has ceased to have a central role in modern psychoanalytic theory" (663). Similarly, in his "Revision of Drive Theory," Mark Solms insists that "All drives are self-preservative or preservative of the species; there is no death drive at work in the mind" (1033).

How was it then that Freud incorporated this seemingly anti-intuitive idea into his metapsychology? In their two articles (2018, 2020), Jessica Tran The et al. give an overview of Freud's scientific background and commitments. In opposition to the popular French school of thinking, inspired by the ideas of Claude Bernard, who believed that physiology was an autonomous discipline ruled by physiological laws that are specific to it, Freud was familiar with the German school of physiological thinking, which was dominated by the ideas of physiologists with a physics background. As the authors put it: "Freud's scientific landscape [was] entirely dominated by the physics elevated to the rank of an ideal science" (2018). What this meant was adherence to the strict deterministic model of natural laws as they were known at the time, implying that "all natural phenomena must be brought back to the movement of material particles endowed with invariant driving force, dependent only on their spatial locations" and "the physico-chemical functioning of the living organism is subject to the same laws as inanimate matter, and must be studied within the same terms" (Ilya Prigogine and Isabelle Stengers, qtd. in 2018). Emil du Bois-Reymond, one of the founding members of the German school (despite the name), put this in very strong terms: "No other forces than the common physical and chemical ones are active within the organism. In those cases which cannot currently be explained by these forces one has either to find the specific way or form of their action by means of the physical-mathematical method or to assume new forces equal in dignity to the chemical-physical forces inherent in matter, reducible to the forces of attraction and repulsion" (qtd. in Solms, p. 1035). In contradistinction to this, Bernard, who ostensibly disavowed the ideas of vitalism and affirmed "strict physico-chemical determinism of the vital phenomena," did nonetheless admit "the existence of an undeniable singularity of the *vital aspect* amongst all other physico-chemical aspects." (2018). In other words, in the German school, scientists believed that all complex physiological phenomena must be reducible to the most elemental physical laws; at the same time, the French school, while believing that such reduction was possible in principle, maintained that it is not necessary to perform it because physiological phenomena are subject to higher-level, physiological, laws. One could just leave it at that and not be compelled to pin down "the specific way or form of [the biological forces'] action."

Interestingly, from our modern perspective, Bernard was closer to truth than the scientists

of the German school and Freud. What modern science and scientific philosophy discovered, and what Freud and his contemporaries were not aware of, was the phenomenon of *emergence*. With the growth of complexity or some changing conditions, a system may develop new properties and behaviors described by new sets of regularities. What is also noteworthy is that this change does not occur gradually, but as an event—a jump or shift to the new level. Thus when there are too many cars on the road, the traffic will stop behaving as an atomistic phenomenon and may, in some cases, start obeying the laws of fluid dynamics, i.e. flow like a liquid. Emergent phenomena do not abolish the laws operant on lower levels. The laws of physics and chemistry are not invalidated on the level of biology, but their influence is not conceptually transparent and directly deducible: it would be very difficult to study the properties of blood circulation by following the behavior of individual atoms. In other words, Freud's assumption that the laws of physics should be directly transferable to the level of psychic phenomena was wrong.

But it is this assumption that became one of the factors that contributed to his theory of the death drive. Another source is his patchwork (internally inconsistent, in my opinion) theory of energy that guides human behavior. He was influenced by Newtonian thinking,<sup>[6]</sup> specifically, by Newton's First Law stating that an object that is not interfered with will stay at rest or, if moving, continue to move with constant velocity. In other words, it will move by inertia. Freud connected it to the "principle of neuronal inertia," that is the idea that "neurons tend to divest themselves of [energy]" (qtd. in Tran The et al. 2020). There is no such concept of divestiture of energy in the Newtonian paradigm; this is where Freud's curious blending of physical paradigms intervenes and causes conceptual confusion. But for Freud, the mechanism of drives would be the discharge of excessive energy in order to maintain the organism in the state of equilibrium (we are talking here about *psychic* energy, which works by analogy with the physical energy). The reason a system tends toward an equilibrium is the economic "principle of constancy," which maintains that a living system must keep its level of excitation constant and get rid of buildups of energy. The pleasure principle, which dictates that we experience displeasure when tension, and thus energy, accumulates, and, on the contrary, pleasure when the accumulated energy is discharged, works in concert with the principle of constancy. In "Beyond the Pleasure Principle," Freud writes: "[the] pleasure principle . . . is a tendency operating in the service of a function whose business it is to free the mental apparatus entirely from excitation or to keep the amount of excitation constant or to keep it as low as possible" (336).

The question that immediately presents itself is, which is it? "Entirely free," "constant," or "as low as possible" are three different things and presuppose three different energy-exchange models. Energy being kept constant sounds like the familiar model of homeostasis, which, applied to an organism, means that an organism strives to preserve itself within the right range of temperatures and monitors its energy stores in order in order to protect itself and preserve viability. When it is in a danger zone, it self-regulates. Ironically, the model is conceptually similar to Claude Bernard's understanding of

physiology on an autonomous level of analysis with its “singular vital aspect,” i.e., the life-preserving aspect. According to Tran The et al. (2018), Claude Bernard anticipated the concept of homeostasis, which came later. But the logic behind a homeostatic model is that of energy being depleted and replenished. In Freud’s model, there is excessive energy that must be released, and it is this excessive energy that is the engine behind drives. Freud seems to be working with two different, not easily reconcilable, models of energy circulation, one based on energy deficit, which triggers action, the other on energy excess, which does the same. If the economic logic of the principle of constancy is prevalent, and the energy must be kept within a certain range, and energy lost must be extracted from some outer source, where does all the excessive energy come from? Is it like saying that cars somehow get excessive energy that they must release? On the other hand, if the dominant operational principle of a functioning organism is that of the discharge of energy, one can similarly ask what prevents full discharge and feeds the homeostatic mechanism.

Another confusion comes from Freud’s suggestion that a system will have a tendency to free itself “entirely from excitation.” Freud later frames it as a so-called Nirvana principle, “which would be entirely in the service of the death instincts, whose aim is to conduct the restlessness of life into the stability of the inorganic life” (“The Economic Problem of Masochism” p. 414).<sup>[7]</sup> The death instinct is thus connected to the organic matter’s desire to return to the inorganic state. Thus Newton’s law of inertia becomes neuronal inertia, which leads to death. Here Freud’s mistake, to go back to the previous discussion, is in assuming that Newtonian concepts are transferable to the domain of the conservation of energy, to which the principle of constancy closely relates. This is, in fact, not so. Even though it is common to discuss Newton’s laws and laws of conservation in the same breath, and describe Newton’s Third Law (“action is equal to reaction”) as the law of the conservation of force, technically, this is incorrect. Newton’s laws encapsulate atomistic and local regularities about point masses. Thermodynamic laws<sup>[8]</sup> are statistical laws describing ensembles of particles. And even in their earliest, pre-statistical, formulations they adopted a holistic view of quantities. Temperature and heat exchange were considered in relation to enclosed containers and calculated for systems as wholes. Newton’s laws describe events that occur at isolated locations and involve individual objects, not systems. One cannot derive the law of the conservation of energy from the Newtonian paradigm.

Even though the death drive neither naturally follows from the energetic exchange model nor from Newton’s laws, Freud decided to include it as part of his dualistic idea of drives, the life drive posed in an opposition to the death drive. This dualistic presupposition is made on purely speculative, metaphysical grounds because there is no concrete empirical foundation to support it.<sup>[9]</sup> Influenced by the ideas of Hermann von Helmholtz, the leading figure of the German school, who believed that the paradigm for all natural laws is the antinomy of the two forces, those of attraction and repulsion (such as we encounter within magnetism) (Solms 1040; Tran The et al. 2018). Various instincts and impulses, such as libido, narcissistic tendencies, aggression and masochism, are commandeered by these two

larger forces. Ideally, even the death drive will be co-opted by the life drive in the service of self-preservation, but it is not entirely clear. Another, seemingly irrational, behavioral phenomenon that led Freud to adopt the idea of the death drive was a behavior he observed in some of his patients, a compulsion to repeat certain actions or rehearse certain painful memories that appeared purely neurotic and not beneficial to the patients' survival. In addition to reasonable instances, those pertaining to the repetition of pleasant experiences, "we come now to a new and remarkable fact," he writes, "namely that the compulsion to repeat also recalls from the past experiences which include no possibility of pleasure, and which can never, even long ago, have brought satisfaction even to instinctual impulses which have since been repressed" (Beyond the Pleasure Principle 290-291). Mysteriously, "no lesson has been learned from the old experience of these activities having led only to unpleasure" and "the impression [some normal people] give is of being pursued by a malignant fate or possessed by some 'daemonic' power" (292). In Freud's mind, the cause of this strange phenomenon can be some fundamental destructive force. Thus the empirical phenomenon of repetition compulsion discovered by him is a major factor in convincing him of the reality of the death drive.

In spite of the irrationality of repetition compulsion, which could be seen as an outer expression of some underlying phenomenon, such as the death drive, the support for the existence of the latter has been shown to be flimsy. To recapitulate, the three reasons I offered for the problematic grounding of this hypothesis are the incompatibility between energy-as-deficit and energy-as-excess models, which are both mobilized in his drive theory; the incompatibility between the Newtonian and energetic paradigms, again, deployed seamlessly as one conceptual field, from which he draws the idea of inertia; and the metaphysical nature of his assumption of two fundamental opposing forces. But despite these and other doubts that the dual theory of the drives raises, due to which it has been abandoned by a number of researchers in the field, there has also been an attempt by some to resurrect it by aligning it with the theory of entropy, as expressed by the Second Law of Thermodynamics.<sup>[10]</sup> The Second Law originated from an empirical observation that energy (the quantity used to produce work) does not convert to useful work in its entirety. Part of it dissipates as heat. Thus we can never use all the energy we have invested into a thermodynamic process (as fuel, for example): there is always some loss. This process is described as the growth of entropy, entropy being a thermodynamic quantity measuring how much energy cannot be converted to useful work. Associating Freud's Nirvana principle, the desire to return to the inorganic, and the thermodynamic energy loss appears as a fruitful idea to some cognitive scientists and psychoanalysts.

There are several problems with this. To begin with, returning to our discussion of emergent orders of complexity and new levels of description, the thermodynamic principle of energy loss and dissipation exists on a different level than physiological descriptions of the functioning of an organism. Whether we understand the energetic economy as a homeostatic system that needs to maintain a minimum energy level by either replenishing

depleted energy or getting rid of excess energy, we are talking about a coherent system that is built up by parts that coordinate with each other. But the loss of energy in the system and its eventual coming to a halt (reaching the inorganic state) is not itself part of the energy-circulation cycle. As mentioned above, the dissipation of energy is an empirical observation not adducible to a known law. It remains somewhat mysterious, its physical and causal nature not being fully understood.[\[11\]](#) As Thomas Rabeyron says in “Beyond the Death Drive”: “Biological organisms have to struggle against [the] tendency of matter towards disorganization, which implies an increasing degree of entropy that could lead them to death[\[12\]](#)” (880). In other words, the tendency to increase entropy belongs to physical matter and not to the homeostatic system as system. The relationship between the two is uncertain; entropic loss is not a property of the homeostatic system itself. We can certainly not equate this property of matter external to the functioning of the system with a fundamental drive forming one-half of the dual drive underpinning the workings of the psyche.

In connection with the attempt to explain the death drive through the physical notion of entropy, there is another connection that is being made, that between the death drive as entropy and a very popular “free-energy principle” by Karl Friston. Before I introduce it, I must mention that we are now talking about the level of explanation of dynamical, self-organizing systems. It will take too much time to give even a brief overview of the theory of self-organizing systems, and I will just say a few things to give some context to my discussion of the free-energy principle. In general, these are enclosed systems where order arises spontaneously from local interactions. In some contexts, they can seem as self-starting and self-perpetuating because the causal order goes in two directions: bottom-up and top-down (think of an example of physiology affecting the behavior of an organism in the bottom-up fashion while the environment affecting the way genes are expressed in the top-down direction). It is suggested by many neuroscientists that these self-organizing systems, of which humans are one example, interact with their environment in a predictive fashion.[\[13\]](#) This implies that instead of the older, more familiar model of an organism receiving signals and producing reaction, organisms’ thoughts, reactions, and behavior do not just respond to received signals but anticipate, predict, and forestall what is to come (an example would be a player who predicts the trajectory of a ball and starts running toward it in response to a feint). This type of programming allows us to learn. We want to make correct predictions and not be surprised by our environment so that we develop habits beneficial to survival.[\[14\]](#)

Karl Friston adopts this predictive model and combines it with a thermodynamic view, stating that because “the physiology of biological systems can be reduced almost entirely to their homeostasis,” it is important that they “must have low entropy”(127). “The free-energy principle,” according to Friston, “says that any self-organizing system that is at equilibrium with its environment must minimize its free energy,” which is what keeps the entropy low. This is a principle of self-preservation, which is based on a theoretical speculation, not an



empirical observation that can be demonstrated. Just as Freud's understanding of energy goes back to Helmholtz, so does Friston's. For Helmholtz, there were two kinds of energy, bound energy that was not available for work and free energy that could be converted to work. Free energy, in other words, is a good thing: we want to have it. But in Friston's work it becomes the opposite, the entropic energy that cannot be used and serves as the measure of disorder, and so you want to have less of it.<sup>[15]</sup> Friston writes that the "defining characteristic of biological systems is that they maintain their states and form in the face of a constantly changing environment" and thus there must be some resistance to "a tendency to disorder" (127).

It has become a common phrasing to talk about thermodynamic entropy as a measure of disorder. But, in fact, it does not measure disorder; it simply measures the quantity of energy that is not available to do anything useful with. Arieh Ben-Naim calls this phrase a metaphor when used in relation to entropy, and not a real description. And while many people think that equating entropy and disorder was first done by Ludwig Boltzmann, who gave a statistical interpretation to entropy, Ben-Naim says that this is not so (19-20). The statistical interpretation looks at distinct positions and states of molecules instead of holistic characteristics, such as temperature. But it does not tell you which of these individual configurations is more orderly than the other.<sup>[16]</sup> For this, you need context: something can be seen as more or less orderly depending on what is being measured. When we speak in terms of order or disorder, we are no longer seeing the world in terms of energy or Newtonian interactions; we are seeing it through the lens of "information." And this is the question: can we seamlessly blend the theoretical apparatuses of the two domains, energy and information? There is, in fact, such a thing as information entropy, which has a different provenance, coming from Claude Shannon's measure of information, which is "a measure of the uncertainty of data in an information channel" (Kish, Ferry p. 1). This concept is indeed relevant to the paradigm of predictive processing. We want to know that our predictive statistical models are precise; we do not want to be uncertain or surprised. So it is true then, were we able to conflate the informational and thermodynamic entropies and treat them as two sides of the same coin, our problems would be solved. It would mean that we have found an elegant formalism that can accommodate both the mental aspect of prediction and the energetic "engine" of its underlying physiology. Unfortunately, we cannot. To be sure, it so happens that both quantities are described by the same formula, which leads to an easy substitution of terms when applying "a measure of disorder" to thermodynamic entropy. But some physicists point out that this is not correct. In addition to Ben-Naim, L.B. Kish and D.K. Ferry, in their vividly titled article "Information Entropy and Thermal Entropy: Apples and Oranges," insist that "efforts to find general physical principles that interrelate changes in the information entropy and the thermal entropy in physical systems are invalid" (11). In other words, Friston's free energy principle might not have solved the question of connecting the physical to the mental.

What remains is the question of whether his free-energy principle can be used as a

foundation of Freud's dual drive theory. Some psychoanalysts think this is the case.[\[17\]](#) In Solms's estimation, "When Friston applied his free energy principle to the nervous system, he caused a revolution, the full effects of which have not yet been felt, at least not by nonspecialists, but it has resulted in his having become (objectively) the most influential neuroscientist in the world" (1956). Tran The et al. find in the free-energy principle a satisfactory explanation of the anti-intuitive notion of the death drive.

Based on these new ideas, the 'death drive' might be recast as a natural tendency of certain out-of-equilibrium systems to reach a steady state characterized by a minimization of free energy. Indeed, there have been attempts to connect Freudian notions of free (unbound) energy to the variational free energy that figures in theoretical neurobiology and statistical mechanics (2020).

But if the death drive is simply a tendency to reach an equilibrium (and maintain, I presume, some homeostatic minimum of energy necessary for survival) then in what way is it a *death* drive? The paradoxical content of Freud's life-denying death drive is thus lost. I therefore find attempts to rehabilitate Freud's dual-drive theory by appealing to Friston's free-energy principle unconvincing.

I have tried to show that the death drive has either fallen out of favor, been dismissed, or re-interpreted to fit the latest cognitive science models. My main objection when it comes to the latter is that these models are based on energetic and informational dynamical systems that are driven by the logic of self-preservation (to repeat, the destructive vector of entropy is not part of the homeostatic cycle, it is a property of the underlying matter). They are neither self-contradictory nor paradoxical, but are ultimately geared toward survival. Even the predictive conundrum mentioned in footnote (14) of two competing exigencies, that of predicting accurately and its opposite, that of making mistakes in order to stay adaptable, cannot be said to express a paradox but rather tension or a balancing movement.

There is one more candidate for the death drive mechanism that we must consider, that of addictive behavior. Addiction does appear like an irrational self-harming behavior that is in opposition to the natural biological goal of survival through self-preservation but also procreation (an addict cannot properly take care of his or her children). Neuroscience, however, can accommodate such maladaptive addictive habits without resorting to paradox. For example, Mark Miller et al. propose a theory of addiction that speculates that the brains of addicts are too sensitive, too precise at predicting. They suggest that "addiction can prove harmful to the person because as their addiction progressively takes hold, the addict comes to embody a predictive model of the environment that fails to adequately attune them to a volatile, dynamic environment" (1). In other words, addicts are hyper-focused on predicting correctly what the next stimulus from the environment will be, and thus on eliminating prediction errors and developing an automatic and habitual way of responding. But if something changes in the environment and they start receiving unexpected signals,

they will not be prepared for what life will throw at them, which might lead to harm or even death. Drugs can affect the brain in such a way as to deceive it about its prediction error rates. “Addictive substances make it seem to the organism as if error had been reduced but sadly for the addict this is just an illusion. The result in the long-run is almost inevitably a greater amount of uncertainty arising from a loss of sensitivity to the wider concerns of life” (9). The above analysis shows that addiction can be unproblematically inscribed into a schema of neural circuitry acting toward self-preservation. When the predictive mechanism misfires, it is the matter of simple miscalibration and error, not an underlying orientation toward death.[\[18\]](#)

But even though Freud’s metaphysical assumption about dual opposing drives is not supported by evidence, and the effort to incorporate it into recent theories of cognition is not satisfying, as I hope to have shown, I do not believe that it should be dismissed. The death drive as Freud theorizes it might not exist, but something like it must exist. He is completely correct, in my opinion, to intuit a paradox in human behavior that is not explicitly adaptive in biological and energetic terms, although it might be adaptive on a higher level of human existence as a symbolic species. One way it may express itself is in irrational behavior, masochism, self-harm, or self-sabotage. Changing direction, perhaps rather abruptly, I will now look at a short story where self-sabotage is foregrounded in a humorous way, and this will lead me to the final segment, where I will contemplate the anthropological foundations of the death drive in GA terms.

The story comes from the collection *Ours (Nashi)*, written by a U.S.-based, émigré Russian writer, Sergey Dovlatov, an early practitioner of autofiction, published in English in 1989. This collection of stories paints literary portraits of his family members and their vicissitudes under communism. The story in question is called “My First Cousin” and tells the story of Dovlatov’s only cousin, the only child of his mother’s only sister, with Dovlatov being an only child as well. “Cousin” in Russian is often rendered as “brother,” so the Russian reader does not understand until later in the story that the main character is actually a cousin. This and the unique brother-like relationship between the protagonist and the narratee, both being only children of sisters without other siblings, emphasizes their mimetic-double relationship, which we discover as the story unfolds. The cousin, Boris, is a couple of years older than Sergey, and is supposed to be a role model because of his brilliance, which makes Sergey somewhat jealous.

He was an exemplary Soviet boy—a top student, a football player, and a collector of scrap metal. He kept a notebook in which he wrote down wise sayings. He planted a birch tree in his courtyard. In the drama club he always played the Young Guard.

I was younger but behaved worse. He was always being held up to me as an example. He was upright, modest, and well read. I was always being told, Borya does well in school, helps his parents, is good at sports. Borya won the school chemistry

competition. Borya nursed a wounded nestling. Borya put together a detector receiver (to this day I have no idea what this is) (77).

After this lavish description, Dvlatov changes gears: "suddenly something unreal happened. Something beyond description. I almost have no words. To put it briefly, my cousin Borya pissed on the school director," having climbed on a windowsill (77-78).

We never get a clear idea why he does it. He answers the narrator's question by saying: "When I saw [the director] that day, I realized it was now or never!" (78) and the reader is no wiser.

After the incident, Borya loses his chance to graduate with honors, but eventually his transgressions are forgotten, and he is accepted into a theater institute, where he studies the history of theater. Again, everything is going very well. During his studies, he has earned a reputation of being politically trustworthy.

An impeccable Komsomol dossier trailed after him: he worked on virgin-lands projects and commanded a construction unit; took an active part in a squad that assisted the police; was a terror to petit-bourgeois thinking and all vestiges of capitalism in the consciousness of the people (p.79).

His career continues to rise. Things go so well that

It was delicately suggested to him that he join the Party. He hesitated. It seemed to him he wasn't worthy . . . And then, suddenly, my cousin once again distinguished himself. I don't know how to put it any better. Briefly, Borya committed twelve robberies (80).

The reason for these robberies is not given very clearly either. It may be an opportunistic, not premeditated, crime. He and his friend have apparently robbed twelve tourist buses that transport foreign tourists and stolen valuable items that were in scarce supply in the Soviet Union.

Boris is given a sentence of three years. While in jail, he asks his cousin, the protagonist, to send him some self-improvement literature, such as "Teach Yourself French," "Teach Yourself German," or "Learn to Play the Guitar." The Dvlatov character has, in turn, been getting reports from his cousin. "My cousin wrote that he had been appointed an orderly. Then a brigadier. And finally, chief administrator in charge of the bath house. . . As a career it was dizzying. And to be moving up in a labor camp was extraordinarily difficult" (82).

After he is released, he gets a job at a film studio as a light technician, but he does not stay in this position long. Again, he starts climbing a career ladder, and soon becomes an assistant director. His criminal past is forgotten. He is promised to be able to direct his own

feature, and the studio's communists beg him to join the Communist Party. Boris's future looks very bright. But then again something happens. He inexplicably starts drinking and socializing with suspicious characters. During one drinking episode, he runs over and kills a policeman. He is sent to prison again. And so on...

In parallel with the cousin narrative (but somewhat in the background), we are following the story of the narrator. Partly we already know his life circumstances from numerous other auto-fictional stories, and we just fill in some blanks. Pieced together, his story is much more "normal" than the absurd narrative of the cousin, for whom he serves as a foil. There are ups and downs, some humorous episodes of his own self-sabotage, but they are less extreme than those of his cousin's. Overall, his life goes from worse to better, from being a dissident to being allowed to emigrate to the U.S. and becoming a somewhat successful writer. But partly we also learn new information about the narrator from this story. For example, while he was drafted into the military police as a young man, he was made to serve as a prison guard. And, ironically, one of his stints was as a guard of his brother's prison camp. "So I was a guard. And Borya was a prisoner. And it even came about that I stood guard over my cousin. True, not for very long. I don't really want to write about it. Otherwise everything would come out sounding overliterary, like Mikhail Sholokhov's *Tales from the Don* [civil war stories. M.L.]" (83). Their situations are now reversed. When they were kids, Borya, the older, would protect him and bring him sweets, but now it is the younger brother/cousin who is guarding the older. Recalling to mind the Biblical idea of being his brother's keeper, which the narrator both ironically affirms and undermines, the story brings into focus the mimetic nature of their relationship.

But does the story demonstrate the operation of the death drive? I would say, yes, both thematically and narratively. First of all, all the acts of self-sabotage are violent or aggressive acts, from peeing on the principal's head from a high-storey window, to robbing tourists, to killing a policeman. By the end of the story, "he had once again begun to drink and get into fights in restaurants. He was threatened with being laid off from work. It was as though he could live only in confinement" (97). This might be a stretch, but I would claim that even the genre of autofiction itself is a species of violence. In autofiction, you are narrating your autobiography but without the responsibility of telling the truth that a real autobiography would require. Instead, you claim the freedom of fictional writing by freely inventing biographical facts about characters who have real-life counterparts. Autofictional narratives frequently arouse ire from the people whose depiction takes too many liberties, and this is why the choice to write in the autofictional genre can be seen as an act that incites scapegoating and violence. In this case, we can say that the author scapegoats his cousin, making him a caricature figure. Despite the amusing nature of the story, it is written in a dark genre.

The motivations of the hero of the story remain obscure and somewhat mysterious, as mentioned before. He never justifies doing irrational, self-harming things. We can guess

that the reason might be that he does not want to join the Communist Party, which a further rise in his career would necessitate (you could not reach a very high position in the Soviet Union without proving yourself to be “politically trustworthy”), and so he sabotages himself at every juncture. This interpretation is supported by the first sentence of the story: “Life has turned my first cousin into a criminal. It seems to me he was lucky. Otherwise, he would inevitably have become a high-ranking Party functionary” (75). But if so, there is no indication of Boris’ sabotaging himself consciously. In any case, we have evidence of a patently unconscious, self-destructive behavior that vitiates the injunction of thriving.

The story thematically captures something irrational about human behavior, some tendencies that are of no benefit to those that exhibit them. Although the action in the story is caricatured for comic and political effects (to show the absurdity of life under communism), this phenomenon is also something we can recognize from everyday life— it is a real phenomenon that does not follow cognitive science models of the psyche based on self-preservation. To understand what it is, I suggest that we also look at the story not only through the lens of plot and theme but through that of narrativity as well, i.e., from the perspective of the *telling*, and not only the *told*. We know that stories are told retrospectively. The narrators already know what happens before they start their story-telling. Some narrative strategies produce the effect of an intrusive narrator, the narrator who “reads” with the narratee and anticipates the audience’s reactions, commenting on or preempting them. In this story, we happen to have an intrusive narrator, who is the authorial figure, Sergey Dovlatov. He sounds apologetic as he anticipates the surprise, perhaps shock, the reader will experience on learning what the hero of the story has done: “And suddenly something unreal happened. Something beyond description. I almost have no words” or “And then, suddenly, my cousin once again distinguished himself. I don’t know how to put it any better.” Not only does he know what is going to happen, but he feels responsible: it is as if he and the main character, his cousin, are one, which would support the mimetic-double reading.

I propose to look at the narrator-narratee dynamic as a narrator-narratee “system,” in which the narrator and narratee are “coupled” with each other. This coupling, I believe, characterizes narrative thinking as a phenomenon that can be traced to the scene of origin. The participant who first withdraws his gesture of appropriation and converts it to the gesture of designation must foresee the potential outcome of a violent contestation for the desired object as the result of a breakdown of hierarchical order. The cognitive structures that make possible the issuance of the first sign are also necessary and sufficient for the origin of narrative thinking, where the split of consciousness between the “narrator” and “narratee” is thematized. The first ostensive sign that is understood by the entire community is a mini-narrative: it tells a cautionary tale about a potential violent future. The anticipating consciousness (of each participant, of a community as a whole) “returns” from the future, as it were, as the consciousness of the narrator, while a part of it stays in the present as the consciousness of the narratee. Indeed, story-telling is a communal

phenomenon. Every story that we tell others we also tell to ourselves, turning ourselves into a narratee. And symmetrically, every time we listen to a story, we join the narrator by anticipating what is to come. This implies that we oscillate constantly between the perspectives of the narrator and narratee.

The coupling between the two creates the condition of compulsion. The narrator already knows what is going to happen, and so the future cannot be escaped. When Dovlatov's narrator starts his story by revealing that "Life has turned my first cousin into a criminal. It seems to me he was lucky. Otherwise, he would inevitably have become a high-ranking Party functionary," he imparts his knowledge from a retrospective point of view. Life is fate in this story, and fate is providential because it has already calculated what would be the best life path in this fictional world. The compulsive aspect of narrative configuration and its Freudian echoes have been discussed by Peter Brooks in *Reading for the Plot*, 1984. I addressed this topic in more detail in a couple of previous articles,[\[19\]](#) but I will briefly summarize it. There is a compelling aspect to narrating both from the narrator's and narratee's perspective. The narratee could be spellbound by suspense, by becoming deeply engrossed in the story because of other compelling aspects, such as characterization or language. But the narrator (surprisingly, perhaps) is also compelled to tell his story, obeying, as Brooks suggests, "the desire to be heard, recognized, understood" (54). This is one of the reasons it is difficult to refrain from telling secrets: a story formulated on our private scene is a story that simultaneously exists on the communal scene of representation and "demands" to be voiced. The narratee and narrator exist inseparably from each other in the performative moment of now.

The compulsion to tell and listen can be metaphorized as expressions of the death drive. The narratee caught in the suspense experience is in the grip of what Brooks calls "narrative desire," which is paradoxical. This is "the paradox of narrative plot as the reader consumes it: [it is] diminishing as it realizes itself, leading to an end that is the consummation (as well as the consumption) of its sense-making" (52). In other words, the narratee wants to get to the end to know what happens but also does not want to come to the end because he wants to prolong his reading experience: "the ultimate determinants of meaning lie *at the end*, and narrative desire is ultimately, inexorably, desire *for the end*" (52). Put this way, narrative desire *is* the death drive. It is not some homeostatic condition it wants to go back to. It actually wants to come to the end of the reading experience—kill, extinguish it. Brooks uses a very helpful metaphor for this paradox to help our minds to grapple with it. It is the metaphor of Scheherazade and the sultan from *One Thousand and One Nights*. The double bind of wanting and not wanting to come to the end is represented as two characters, which temporarily lifts the paradox: Scheherazade will literally be killed once she finishes her narration, so she must keep talking; the sultan, invested in the narrative suspense, must keep listening; however, their final goals diverge. But in their compulsion to keep talking and to keep listening, they are coupled as two moving parts of the narrator-narratee system that belongs to narrative thinking, with Scheherazade representing the position of the

narrator and the sultan, of the narratee.

It is interesting that Brooks talks about narrative desire in terms of “consummation, as well as consumption.” This phrasing resonates with the Generative Anthropology’s view of desire and its role in the originary event. The desire is sustained by the promise of consumption of the desirable object held in limbo through *deferral*, the originary GA category. My last point in this paper is to claim that deferral holds the key to the paradoxical drive toward death, which Freud was right about, but in contradistinction to Freud, we can explain it in anthropological-philosophical terms and not as part of some foundational metaphysical duality that governs the universe. First I would like to return to the “daemonic” repetition compulsion that led Freud to articulate his idea about the death drive, the adjective “daemonic” really stressing the compulsive and unconscious/uncanny aspects of some forms of repetition, plus the fact that repetition compulsion violates the pleasure principle. Holowchak and Lavin give examples of beneficial repetitions, such as encountered in game-playing and are connected to the pleasure of recognition, and consequently, learning. Another example would be repetition done with the beneficial goal of working through or mastering or coming to terms with something difficult. But there is also a variety of repetition compulsion that seems to serve no useful purpose and is often trauma-related, that does not advance mastering something and thus does not contribute to self-preservation. What kind of psychic force would pull one again and again to repeat some past behavior compulsively? Is it something related to the structure of memory? Holowchak and Lavin, who are critical of Freud’s theory of the death drive, nevertheless think that “Freud’s ideas on repetition and compulsion to repeat, as they developed over the years, have paved a path for much fruitful research on human memory and psychical dysfunction” (663).

I believe that we are not talking about some pathological memory but about the structure of deferral. What has been deferred must be returned to because we put a mental “bookmark” at the place where we digressed. If in the middle of a narrative, a narrator starts telling a story within a story, the outer narrative is expected to be resumed when the inner story is finished. Similarly, if a linguist is parsing a sentence and needs to jump off to process a subordinate clause, he or she must return to the main sentence once the subtask is done. Or to take the first use of deferral on the originary scene: the participants anticipate returning to the spoils of the hunt after violence has been postponed. We think of deferral as a future-oriented process, but in deferring, we create the opposite pull that is mechanical and drive-like in the way it acts on our thinking as we “wrap our mind around” the entire operation. This string-snapping-back property of deferral is empirically observable and does not need special demonstration or proof. But I am hypothesizing the existence of something like a retractive movement possessing a reverse, unconscious counter-logic, which must occur in order to make deferral conceivable in the first place. It is a rearward flow of operations that re-gathers the bookmarks, retraces the steps, and recombines the deferred bits. I call it the movement of *consolidation*. It is impossible for us to consciously embrace it because our thinking works forward, but we need to postulate it as a component of symbolic, and



specifically narrative, thinking. It works backward, in a counterintuitive fashion, and this is why it is not directly accessible to our consciousness. One way of metaphorizing it is as a cause-effect flow that unfolds from the future point of furthest deferral toward the past. The end-to-front and front-to-end paths are coupled and take place at the same time. In some way, the reverse path, the path of retrieving the points of deferral, must be created—inscribed, programmed—simultaneously with the forward-oriented prolongation gesture of postponement. In my article “Hierarchical Thinking, Grammatical Structures, and the Originary Scene,” I work out a real example of code execution in an Artificial Intelligence language that operates through consolidation.<sup>[20]</sup> The fact that some AI programs work like this does not mean that it is implemented the same way in human minds; it just shows that the logic of consolidation is implementable on principle.

I want to reiterate that the reverse flow or the “snapping-back” action of deferral is unconscious because we cannot think backward. And it is in this Moebius-strip-like turning from the conscious to the unconscious, both forming a whole, I locate the human paradox. The reverse component of thinking may play a big part in the phenomenon we call the *unconscious*, but this is not the direction I am pursuing for now. A corollary to what I am claiming, however, is that deferral defers not just from the beginning of an individual life when a child is initiated into language but from the very first point of deferral, the point of the origin of language for the entire human community. And thus the return of deferral pulls us back not only to the early moment of our lives but to the moment of collective origin. This is what we mean when we talk about “going back to the source,” “longing to return to the origin,” or “being haunted by the past,” the sentiments accompanied by an existential sense of nostalgia. This zero-point of the birth of human consciousness is the collective beginning, the return to which would mean the erasure of the human species, the Nirvana-like restoration of the inorganic state. This, of course, is impossible, but the very first deferral exerts its abiding pull on the human psyche, the pull toward death. I hope thus to have demonstrated in this paper that Freud had a true anthropological intuition to isolate a paradoxical aspect of human behavior, which he theorized as the death drive. He was right that this death drive is, at least partially, unconscious and mechanistic. But rather than being a part of a metaphysical opposition between two fundamental universal forces, the death drive (we might want to rename it) is symbolic, not physiological. It came into existence with the origin of language and narrativity. Yes, it is real, but it is unlikely to take us back to the state of the inorganic.

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## Notes

[1] Oscillatory movements are paradoxical form because they cannot be contained within the dimensionality of that which oscillates. By "breaking out" into the next dimension, as it were, the oscillating points appear to us to be existing simultaneously, violating the logic of non-contradiction. This requires a more thorough exposition and will not be dealt with in the present paper.

[2] I am conflating mind and symbolic thinking for the sake of this argument since by mind I imply the human mind, human thinking, which is intrinsically symbolic.

[3] Even though Freud works with the question of symbolization, its discussion is not directly relevant to the energetic vocabulary of converting energy to action.

[4] Despite their similarities, it would not be natural to insert Girard's mimetic desire into Freud's system of life and death drives because the latter are focused on an individual consciousness and do not recognize its scenic and collective human condition. Perhaps it is the other way around: we can see evidence of mimetic desire on aggressive impulses, which belong to the death drive.

[5] More on duality below.

[6] Tran The et al., 2018, 2020.

[7] He also says, in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* that "*an instinct is an urge inherent in organic life to restore as earlier state of things which the living entity has been obliged to abandon under the pressure of external disturbing forces*" (308-309), a formulation that suggests organic homeostasis rather than death by returning to the inorganic state. The metaphor of the "eternal sleep" reconciles these ideas, with sleep being a state of rest, the lowest level of energy needed to support the living body, but eternal sleep as death referring to the energy level of zero.

[8] I have mentioned the First Law, the law of conservation. I will discuss the Second Law shortly.

[9] Holowchak and Lavin speculate that Freud's reasons might have been psychological, "perhaps owing to his personal disillusionment with the first World War" (658).

[10] As far as I know, Freud himself did not refer to the Second Law although it had been formulated at the time of his writing on the topic.

[11] There is a statistical interpretation of entropy that says that if we look at a system as a configuration of particles, we can see that the system is less likely to be in a configuration that we are interested in than in other configurations. But this interpretation of entropy through probability and individual states of particles tells us nothing about causality.

[12] I will comment shortly on the notion of "disorganization."

[13] My understanding is that while this model is not universally accepted, it is quite popular.

[14] To make it even more subtle, learning sometimes involves deviating and making deliberate errors in prediction in order not to fall into habit completely but map out neighboring environmental conditions in case the home environment will change. Prediction strategies thus balance between trying to stay precise and not too precise in order to make the precision algorithm more flexible.

[15] I am not aware of the reason Friston inverted Helmholtz's definition.

[16] See also my footnote (11).

[17] See Solms, Tran The et al. (2020), Rabeyron (2021).

[18] In an interesting contrast to the cognitive view of addiction, Joachim Duyndam, in his article "Girard and Heidegger: Mimesis, Mitsein, Addiction," finds the root of addiction not in neurology but in the social condition of being with other people (or the collective scene, in GA's vocabulary). He finds crucial similarities between Heidegger's inauthentic dwelling among Others/the They/das Man and Girard's submitting to mimetic desire. Both conditions exert a coercive force on an individual, experienced as addiction.

[19] See, for example, Ludwigs, Marina. "What Propels Narratives Forward: Narrative as Janus." *Anthropoetics*. XIX.2 (Spring 2014) and Ludwigs, Marina. "The Rhetoric of Meaning: Generative Anthropology and the Rhetorical Approach to Narratology." *Anthropoetics*. XXVI.1 (Fall 2020).

[20] Ludwigs, Marina. "Hierarchical Thinking, Grammatical Structures, and the Originary Scene." *Anthropoetics*. XXV.2 (Spring 2020).