

# ***THE NEGATIVE LOGIC OF THE UNCONSCIOUS: A RESPONSE TO ADORNO'S MOST SEVERE CRITIQUE OF PSYCHOANALYSIS\****

## **A LÓGICA NEGATIVA DO INCONSCIENTE: UMA RESPOSTA À MAIS SEVERA CRÍTICA DE ADORNO À PSICANÁLISE**

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**ABSTRACT** *The aim of this text is to conduct a critical analysis of Theodor Adorno's approach to psychoanalytic theory, particularly that of Sigmund Freud, focusing on aphorisms 36 to 39 and 42 from "Minima Moralia." In the first part, we will read the philosopher's arguments taking into account the strongest aspects in his argumentation. In the second part, we will provide critical points to highlight possible conceptual inaccuracies present in Adorno's approach. We will try to demonstrate the hypothesis that Adorno's criticisms disregard three important conceptual aspects of psychoanalytic theory: the unconscious conceived from a systematic point of view, repression differentiated from suppression, and the drive impulse conceived from the dynamics of repression.*

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**Keywords:** *Theodor Adorno. Sigmund Freud. Minima Moralia. Psychoanalysis.*

**RESUMO** *O objetivo deste texto é realizar uma análise crítica da abordagem de Theodor Adorno à teoria psicanalítica, principalmente a de Sigmund Freud, com foco nos aforismos 36 a 39 e 42 das Minima Moralia. Na primeira parte, faremos uma leitura dos argumentos do filósofo levando em conta os pontos mais fortes de sua argumentação. Na segunda, oferecemos apontamentos críticos para evidenciar as impropriedades conceituais que vemos presentes na abordagem de Adorno. Procuraremos demonstrar a hipótese de que as críticas de Adorno desconsideram três importantes aspectos conceituais da teoria psicanalítica: o inconsciente concebido de um ponto de vista sistemático, o recalque como diferenciado da repressão e o ímpeto pulsional concebido a partir da dinâmica do recalque.*

**Palavras-chave:** *Theodor Adorno. Sigmund Freud. Minima Moralia. Psicanálise.*

Just like Michel Foucault, Theodor Adorno oscillated in his assessments of psychoanalytic theory throughout his philosophical career. Both of them had initial texts with openly positive appreciations of Freud, such as Foucault's *History of Madness* and Adorno's "The Unconscious in the Transcendental Doctrine of the Soul," which was his first habilitation thesis. Furthermore, they continued to use psychoanalytic concepts in their theories and engaged in dialogue with Freud on crucial occasions, as seen in Adorno and Horkheimer's work *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, where psychoanalysis emerges as a backdrop for reflections and a direct source of conceptual formulations. For instance, the theory of anti-Semitism present in this work directly employs the concepts of ego, id, and superego, as well as the hypotheses of projection as a psychic mechanism and anxiety as having a libidinal source. This extensive presence of psychoanalysis led to criticism that their theory was excessively "psychologist" in nature (Cf. Rantis, 2001).

On the other hand, Foucault and Adorno also delivered sharp criticisms of psychoanalysis throughout their intellectual trajectories. In the first volume of *The History of Sexuality*, titled "The Will to Knowledge," Foucault dedicates himself to demonstrating how psychoanalysis is part of a set of discursive

strategies whose main purpose was to bring forth sex as a persistent object of discussion and, thereby, produce individuals subjected to a strategy of cooptation through power relations (Cf. Mezan, 1985; Whitebook, 2003; Freitas, 2015). As for Adorno, his critiques of Freud are scattered across various argumentative contexts, including his social philosophy, theory of knowledge, as well as his philosophy of art and music. Some of the most severe criticisms can be found in *Minima Moralia*, especially in aphorisms 36-40, 42, and 136. The latter criticizes the concept of sublimation, which gains more relevance when considered alongside other occurrences of the theme, as seen in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (Cf. Freitas, 2020) and *Aesthetic Theory*<sup>1</sup>. Aphorism 40 provides a direct critique of Freudian revisionists, with which we largely agree and have already addressed in an article one we invite the reader to read (Cf. Freitas, 2020). The other aphorisms address a more homogeneous theme and allow for a collective approach proposed in this essay. However, it is essential to emphasize that there is not enough space for an exhaustive exposition of the concepts concerned, as it would demand extensive documentation of Freud's and other psychoanalysts' works, along with an analysis that links Adorno's formulations to other aspects of his oeuvre.

*Minima Moralia* consist of a series of short aphorisms, some composed of just one sentence, addressing the violated condition of the contemporary individual, subjected to the pressure of an ideological totality constituted by dominant cultural forms. From seemingly mundane situations, such as simply closing a door, to moral, scientific, religious, and even world literature concepts, Theodor Adorno identifies signs of cooptation and a possible disappearance of the subject. These reflections can be understood as a kind of "philosophical chronicle" of the disillusionment provoked by the horror of World War II, where the genocidal barbarism of Nazifascism revealed the cruel alliance between highly developed rationality and the radical denial of Culture as a promise of happiness. In this scenario, the individual and their ego are seen as mere remnants of a competitive bourgeois era, which perhaps never materialized according to its original promise. Any attempt, whether theoretical or aesthetic, to portray them as integral and substantial is unmasked as naivety, ideology, or simply falsehood. Psychoanalysis, dedicating itself to a rational-dialogical clarification of the psychic constitution of the subject and emerging precisely

1 In this text, the critique of psychoanalysis is forceful: "It deciphers phenomena, yet falls short of grasping the artistic phenomenon itself. In its view, works of art amount to nothing more than facts; however, it fails to apprehend the inherent objectivity of these works, their harmony, formal level, critical impulses, their connection to non-psychic reality, and ultimately, their conception of truth" (Adorno, 1997a, p. 21).

during the transition from the romantic optimism of the 19th century to the devastating wars of the 20th century, is not excluded from this critical panorama. Consistent with the melancholic and disillusioned tone of the work, Adorno does not evaluate the theoretical-clinical effort of psychoanalysis positively, which aims to provide individuals with liberation from the “unyielding laws of their unconscious,” as expressed by him and Horkheimer in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. On the contrary, the cure offered by this approach is interpreted as a sign of subjugation to a diseased normality, possibly worse than the original neurosis itself.

The present essay comprises two parts: the first one presents Adorno’s arguments found in aphorisms 36-39 and 42 of *Minima Moralia*, interpreting them in the most favorable way to the author. The second part introduces critical elements to provide a response to such arguments.

Before we delve into the analysis of the selected passages, it is essential to address a question raised in some academic events where we discussed this theme. It concerns the idea that Adorno’s criticisms in these aphorisms do not apply broadly to psychoanalysis or specifically to Freud but target the concepts of revisionists, such as Karen Horney and Erich Fromm. Although it is true that some of the philosopher’s formulations specifically refer to revisionism, notably in aphorism 41, it is evident that his criticisms are not so limited. In aphorism 36, when questioning the psychic health promised by psychoanalysis as an adjustment to a sick society, Adorno states: “the suspicion raised by psychoanalysis is confirmed before it itself became a factor of hygiene.” Given the context, it is clear that revisionist theory is associated with psychic hygiene, and thus Adorno’s suspicions extend to psychoanalysis before the formulations of Karen Horney and other revisionist theorists. Aphorism 37 is entirely directed at specific formulations by Freud, some explicitly cited, leaving no doubt that it is not solely a critique of revisionism. In aphorism 38, the notion of the capacity for enjoyment (*Genußfähigkeit*), first formulated by Freud and enunciated at the beginning of the aphorism as linked to psychoanalysis in general, without any specific theoretical specification. The very term “Genußfähigkeit” is taken as indicative of the falsehood to be denounced further. Aphorism 39 addresses a theme related to all psychoanalytic (and psychological, in general) treatments, namely, that the patient’s ego is reduced to an object of study, discourse, and treatment. Although the revisionist theory may make this aspect more debatable, Adorno’s observations clearly extend to all psychoanalytic treatments. Finally, aphorism 42 criticizes the fundamental principle of free association in psychoanalysis. While some phrases may seem to address how revisionists hastily apply general concepts to clinical material, it is undeniable that the majority of

Adorno's formulations refer to the procedure itself, stemming from Freudian conception. In light of this, we believe that limiting the object of Adorno's criticisms solely to revisionist formulations is an excessively condescending interpretation. There are various formulations addressing general concepts of psychoanalysis, one aphorism explicitly citing and referring to Freud, and in the other parts, it is not clear to what extent these criticisms are confined to revisionism. It is relevant to demonstrate that they do not apply solely to Freud but to psychoanalysis as a whole.

## I

The irony present in the title of aphorism 36 is as emphatic as the evaluation of the significance of psychoanalysis in the context of the obfuscation (*Verblendungszusammenhang*) of a fully socialized society: "Health for death" (an inversion of the title of Søren Kierkegaard's book *The Sickness Unto Death*). To be cured through psychoanalysis would be to succumb to the longing for homogenization, leaving (almost) no trace of singularities within the realm of abstract exchanges of late capitalism, whose strength in generating contradictions within itself is proportional to its ability to conceal them. The social superpower strengthens itself by eliminating neurotic divergences and their sufferings, paving the way for a massive cohesion of all gears. The more individuals recognize the principle of reality as the parameter of health for themselves, the more they annul themselves, becoming mere functionalized vehicles in a faceless, faultless, and unobstructed dynamic complex<sup>2</sup>. The individual pursuit of psychic health or normality implies not only more social repression as the price for conforming to social models but also the need to repress the symptoms resulting from this mutilation, in the name of a completely aseptic existence. The central foundation of health offered by psychoanalysis lies in the appearance of conformity to a market of healthy individuals, where only those who hide the garbage produced by capitalist dynamics beneath their subjectivities can achieve success. This approach convinces people to believe in the validity of rules of coexistence and performance (sexual, ethical, familial, technical, among others) as much as possible while demonizing the traces of suffered and damaged individuation as human failures (backwardness, weakness).<sup>3</sup>

2 Adorno (1997c) conceives society as fundamentally functional.

3 At this juncture, Marcuse's interpretation of the Freudian reality principle as the 'performance principle' aligns seamlessly with Adorno's critical stance (Cf. Marcuse, 1955).

Psychoanalytic cure is seen by Adorno as something that can deny people the so-called “flight to illness,” as mentioned by Freud, in which neurotic symptoms provide some relief from family, professional, religious, and other oppressions (Cf. Freud, 1999f, Lecture XXIV). Furthermore, psychoanalysis would not offer a sufficient understanding of the etiology of neurosis, as the infiltration of social falsity likely occurs at absurdly early stages in ontogenesis, colonizing instinctual life even before the typical conflicts of repression form (conflicts that are studied by psychoanalysis and fundamental to its functioning). This lack of understanding of the deep origin of neurosis leads psychoanalysis to suffer from an irreparable deficit in its psychic approach and still to use instruments dangerously similar to the practices it should combat, namely, those that instigate conflicts, repressions, and suppressions. When repression is suspended as the final goal of treatment, the result is the triumph of the same abstract forces that previously impregnated the subject. This happens because, with the absence, overcoming, or suppression of conflicts, the social desire for the individual to abandon their own singularity is ratified, becoming liquefied, and ultimately volatized to be happy as someone as efficient and adjusted as non-inhibited, non-anxious, and non-suffering. The escape from neurosis would lead to entry into the cemetery of lost individualities, whose tombstones display success over their singularities. Life, for Adorno, in recognizing itself as such, necessarily includes the awareness of the harmful impact of the social system on the unique body of the individual, who confronts suffering as an intrinsic part of living existence.

Adorno’s principle of analysis is integration without remainder, which means perceiving in each cured individual the absorption of neurosis derived from the social whole. Those who feel cured celebrate the fact of no longer being considered incapable or maladjusted, while the society that cured them strengthens itself by having one more functional, propagandistic, and devoted individual. It is not difficult to perceive the proximity of such a state of affairs to fascism, as it is not just about producing adjusted beings, but rather producing individuals proud of their conformity, rejecting their neurotic peculiarities with the same enthusiasm with which they adhere to established norms. The pursuit of fulfillment would mean identifying even more deeply with social models, seeking to equate success with the loss of one’s own identity. “Health” here equates the death of the living, contradictory, and therefore unique subject.

The end of the aphorism, however, is surprising, as until the penultimate sentence, we are led to believe in a clear opposition between the morbid health of integration into a sick society on one hand, and neurosis as the last focus of resistance of a singular truth and rationality, expressed through suffering, on the other. This opposition is explicitly stated in aphorism 38, where the cured

and therefore “happy” individual is mentioned, who must relinquish the last remnant of reason offered to them by repression and regression. At the end of aphorism 36, Adorno’s position is more cautious, conceiving neurotic suffering as an index of the same misfortune of “health” for death, experienced in another form. This combination of the main argument with this conclusion leads us to perceive yet another element that motivates the criticisms of aporetic pessimism directed at Adorno by Jürgen Habermas (1985), Albrecht Wellmer (1985), Axel Honneth (1989), and others. These criticisms highlight skepticism regarding any possibility of definitively overcoming the contradictions and conflicts inherent in human life since the pursuit of a supposed “health” can, in reality, lead to the denial of singularity and uncritical adherence to social norms, which can be considered another form of alienation and oppression.

The subsequent aphorism, titled “This Side of the Pleasure Principle” (also an inversion, this time of the name of Freud’s text “Beyond the Pleasure Principle”), argues in favor of the hypothesis that the creator of psychoanalysis despised both sexual/sensual pleasure and spirituality by situating the individual and society in a static, non-dialectically mediated polarization. Freud would oscillate between praising a radical liberation [*hüllenlos*: uncovered, naked] of instincts and equally defending the same repressive mechanisms that he vehemently fought against. When focusing on repression, Freud adopts a libertarian stance, criticizing a “civilized” sexual morality and showing how the “malaise in civilization” derives from its repressive character: people would become ill not by defying social standards but by conforming excessively to them, stifling their perverse antisocial sexual impulses and suffering numerous frustrations.

However, when addressing sublimation, the Viennese psychoanalyst shows his support for civilized culture and its works with “social value,” praising individuals who leave behind their selfish (*selbstsüchtig*) sexual desires and integrate into the universal plan of society. According to Adorno, this psychoanalytic contradiction, in want to liberate desire while considering it individual and selfish, is based on the ambivalent character<sup>4</sup> of progress, “which always develops both the potential for freedom and the reality of repression simultaneously” (MM 96)<sup>5</sup>. Adorno argues that this “Janus-faced” stance of psychoanalysis demonstrates its non-dialectical and static approach

4 “Januscharakter,” a term derived from the Roman myth of Janus, the deity of transformations and new beginnings, depicted with two faces—one looking forward and the other backward.

5 The citations of *Minima Moralia* will be indicated using the abbreviation “MM” followed by the aphorism number. All translations in this essay are of our own authorship.



to the relationship between society and the individual, as it does not recognize how much societal conformation is already at the root of all sexual desire, nor how much rationality seeks its overcoming in pleasure devoid of all intention, somatic, and blind. Adorno rarely outlines a positive vision of utopia, but in this case, he sees pleasure without any intention as an indicator of surpassing the falsity of all partial intentions, uniting nature and culture in a kind of dialectical synthesis, if one can express it with some hermeneutic liberty.

Freud's ambiguous position regarding the value of desire and culture is not limited only to the sexual aspect but also directly extends to the cultural sphere. While relegating perversions to the world of lust ("Lebewelt (the living world)"), he calls for "leaving heaven to angels and sparrows," as the verses quoted at the end of Part IX of "The Future of an Illusion," interpreted by Adorno as a contempt for spirit and culture. Therefore, for the individual subjected to analysis, it is recommended to renounce the selfish content of their sexual desires and, at the same time, to despise the cultural realm beyond what is allowed by the capitalist way of life.

The analytic trajectory would still be marked by another renunciation: that of transference, in which the individual must relinquish their own rationality and thinking. The result of a successful analytic treatment, according to Adorno, is neutral, phlegmatic, placid, empty, and mechanized individuals: "it seems as if their skin has been struck with marked, regular, and standardized blows, as if they practiced mimicry, imitating inorganic forms" (MM 36).

In the following aphorism, 38, Adorno continues his criticisms of psychoanalysis in the clinical realm, focusing on the outcome of treatment. The specific target now is the idea that psychoanalysis intends to restore or provide the individual with the capacity for enjoyment [or pleasure: *Genußfähigkeit*]<sup>6</sup>. Adorno interprets *Genuß* as *Glück* (felicity) and insists that this happiness is corrupted by discursive speculation during the analytic treatment, which primarily takes place through speech. This process would assume a rationalized, abstract, and socially-modeled character, and sometimes it may even be imposed on the individual. Christine Kirchhoff (2007, p. 60), commenting on this passage from *Minima Moralia*, states: "This is undoubtedly true. For the expression 'capacity for enjoyment' does not exactly sound as if all pleasure were purged from it? – as if it designated the opposite of enjoying, and not the capacity to

6 Most often, alongside this concept, Freud also mentions the capacity for work (or production), *Leistungsfähigkeit*, as in this passage: "Just as health and illness are not fundamentally distinct, but solely delimited by a practically determinable cumulative threshold, similarly, the aim of treatment does not extend beyond the practical recovery of the patient: the restoration of their capacity for work/production and enjoyment" (1999a, p. 8).



surrender to something, abandon oneself to it?”. Both Adorno and Kirchhoff see the pleasure to be recovered or achieved psychoanalytically as a victim of sabotage by the discursive trajectory of treatment, eliminating the spontaneity of pleasure by introducing social and intellectual elements. The result of this process would be the pursuit of happiness in positively demarcated objects considered satisfactory, such as industrialized consumer goods, regular doses of sex, cultural commodities, leisure tourism, among others. Similar to the psychic health addressed in the previous aphorism, the happiness brought about by psychoanalytical treatment would be an index of deindividualization, annihilating the remaining singular truth and rationality in repression and regression, giving way to a prescription of “healthy” ways to be happy, already accepted by the establishment. Once again, the analogy with fascism comes into play, this time with a striking image: just as Jews were taken to extermination camps far from urban centers so that their screams of pain would not be heard, psychoanalysis would seek to muffle the voice of unique and singular suffering, covering it with the noise of parties, the aroma and taste of meticulously dosed champagnes, and the frivolous pleasure of consuming cultural commodities, among other superficial elements.

In contrast to this happiness obtained through frequent visits to therapists’ offices, Adorno proposes a critical reflection on the falseness of any partial satisfaction, which contributes to the functioning of the system by managing to conceal suffering through technological advances focused on consumption. It is as if every partial happiness undermines the desire for a more authentic, complete, and true happiness, although still unattainable and even difficult to conceive in its positive aspects (such as blind somatic pleasure, mentioned earlier).

The following aphorism, titled “The Ego is the Id,” establishes a direct connection between four elements: the emergence of the individual in democratic societies (or societies in the process of becoming democratic), the intellectual interest in individuality and personality, the transformation of the subject into an object of control, and its annihilation as something distinct from the world of alienated labor and things. In both ancient Greece, the birthplace of democratic politics, and the early modernity of capitalism, we see societies breaking free from the inertia of social traditions, a loosening of what Nietzsche (1999, Aphorism 9) called the “ethics of ethos” (or “ethics of customs”: “Sittlichkeit der Sitte”), when the individual detaches from previously established and prevailing values. The democratic differentiation of individuals makes them the subject of reflective interest, objects of knowledge in their own right, something nonexistent in a cohesive and socially compact society. The famous

“know thyself” from the Oracle of Delphi, which became a motto of Socratic philosophy, confirms the Protagorean idea of man-measure as the object of philosophical interest par excellence, emphasizing the perception of human singularity as the cornerstone of collective objectivity. However, this political differentiation of the individual, reinforced by their epistemic dignity, comes with a restrictive clause: their rights, including the right to their possessions, can only transition from the realm of abstract ideas to that of material democracy if they do not threaten the maintenance of social hierarchies, whose rigidity remains close to that of ancient pre-democratic societies.

Psychologies of various kinds and finally psychoanalysis in the late 19th century contributed to the consolidation of the notion of individuality and subjectivity, conceiving each person as possessing an ego and a psychic interiority with specific laws and properties. Although these approaches contributed to the establishment of human rights and the perception of the individual’s right not to be immediately subjected to raw power relations, they ended up weakening their object of study precisely by objectifying it, rather than treating it as a subject. The more divisions of instances, faculties, cognitive powers, and psychic properties are established, the more the individual becomes equal to the non-human, to things, leading to an additional form of reification, beyond that described by Marx and Lukács in the world of work. If the latter dehumanizes by reducing each person to a mere producer of commodities, an abstract workforce, the psychoanalytic approach does so by depriving each individual of their autonomy, denounced as illusory along with its epiphenomenon: the ego. According to Adorno, proportional to the psychoanalytic emphasis on the illusory nature of the ego as an in-dividual, there is a diminishment and weakening of subjective forces, incapable of resisting the homogenizing pressure of society. The de-substantialization of subjects within the capitalist machinery would be epistemically duplicated—and therefore reinforced—by the denunciation of the mirage of possessing an ego, relegating each individual to the only way out of resigned adaptation, because powerless, to the societal complex. If individuals are already easily controllable due to the inertial weight of capitalist power relations, they tend to become more manipulable when convinced of the inherent falsehood of their subjective autonomy. Adorno acknowledges that psychoanalysis had the merit of demonstrating how the ego would be an internal representative of external repression. However, in dissecting their own interiority, the subject runs the risk of no longer recognizing themselves as substantially distinct from abstract exchange relations, resulting in the assumption of the reality principle as the goal of analytic treatment, while adaptation becomes resignation to achieve maximum performance.

The last aphorism to be analyzed, number 42, establishes a surprising connection between the speculative character relegated to philosophy after its separation from the sciences and the technique of free association, which is extremely important for any analytic treatment. This technique consists of demanding that the patient freely express all images, ideas, and thoughts during the session, without making any deliberate selection, even if the material to be expressed seems irrelevant. The idea is to minimize the interference of intentional censorship (between the preconscious and conscious systems), which allows for connections to be established with deeper unconscious strata.<sup>7</sup>

For Adorno, this renunciation of selection and critique implies a true abdication of the subject as a critical being capable of confronting social oppression. He argues that thought is reduced to mere material susceptible to be labeled by the taxonomic impulse addressed in aphorism 40, subjecting itself to be a confirmation of what is already known theoretically. Instead of producing critical speculation that surpasses the limitations imposed by scientific rationality, the supposed freedom of thought in analytic treatment ends up turning it into yet another object of science, to be dominated by the same classificatory apparatus. To illustrate the loss of quality in thought during analytic treatment, Adorno does not hesitate to juxtapose it with the prattle of a mother-in-law in contrast with the conceptual value of Friedrich Schelling's *Philosophy of Revelation* (!) — as if both could be compared in their objectives, means, and significance...

## II

Viewed from a critical perspective, the guiding thread of Adorno's stance in these pages of *Minima Moralia* consists of constructing an interpretation of the psychoanalytic endeavor without taking into account the unconscious as a psychic instance with its own laws. Although Adorno investigated this concept in his first doctoral thesis (Adorno, 1997b), qualifying psychoanalysis as the only legitimate theoretical form of access to the unconscious, he did not integrate it substantively into his theoretical formulations. One clearer exception is the theory of anti-Semitism in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, but since the origin of these formulations can be attributed to Horkheimer, judgment regarding them remains suspended.<sup>8</sup> In the other texts, Adorno makes use of a more descriptive

7 Cf. Freud (1999c, pp. 534-7) and J. Laplanche and J.-B. Pontalis (1967, entry "Libre association").

8 Another exception is Freud's defense by Adorno against the revisionists, where the philosopher advocates Freud's standpoint of a psychic nucleus predating culture or existing apart from it; cf. Adorno, 1997e. Nevertheless,

than systematic concept of the unconscious: in the first case, according to Freud, it is a negative determination, of not belonging to consciousness, whereas in the second, it refers to a psychic instance with its own laws of structuration (a “system”), endowed with contents incompatible with the conscious sphere and subject to the action of censorship (also unconscious) (Cf. Freud, 1999d). This approach is intimately connected to the disregard for the concept of repression (*Verdrängung*), which implies the specificity of an unconscious conflict that continuously demands an incomprehensible, strange drive satisfaction, whose logic is opposed to conscious thought (Cf. Freud, 1999e). Instead of using the notion of repression (*Verdrängung*), Adorno seems to conceive psychic conflict as suppression (*Unterdrückung*). While repression produces compromise formations between conflicting forces, suppression involves one force acting upon another, leading to its elimination, softening, or modification (Cf. Laplanche & Pontalis, 1967, entry “Refolement”; Freitas, 2020). The concept of repression is also relevant to delineate the drive, for without it, the latter is easily taken as a diffuse, objectless, amorphous energetic force, owing nothing to the process of psychic formation, devoid of internal fantasy conflict, and merely “expansive,” seeking any object of satisfaction<sup>9</sup>. Following this conception of a psyche without an unconscious system and devoid of repression, every desire tends to be seen as seeking positive pleasure, nullifying, for example, the idea of a repressed masochistic desire, where the subject seeks satisfaction through pain and/or suffering, without necessarily being considered pathological.<sup>10</sup>

Let’s see how these three conceptual absences (systematic unconscious, repression, and drive) form the foundation of Adorno’s criticism of Freud.<sup>11</sup>

In the first analyzed aphorism, number 36, the equivalence of ‘psychic health’ with ‘resigned adaptation’ is only possible for Adorno due to a reductionist interpretation of both notions. Regarding the first, the philosopher’s criticism is motivated by neglect of the conflicted nature of the psyche, preventing him from perceiving the intrinsic nature of a successful outcome in psychoanalytic treatment. Defining the precise aims of an analysis is extremely difficult because, as Jean Laplanche states, they are all internal to the treatment, being defined, reworked, and partially or completely abandoned due to phases of subjective

this did not lead to the assimilation of this principle into Adorno’s own philosophical conception: he praises it in Freud, yet does not incorporate it within his philosophy.

9 Regarding the role of fantasy in the genesis of drive arising from repression, cf. J. Laplanche & J.-B. Pontalis, 1988, and J. Laplanche, 1992c.

10 Regarding the importance of masochism in psychic constitution, cf. Jean Laplanche, 1992a.

11 Given that this hypothesis applies to all of Adorno’s arguments, it was particularly challenging to avoid repetitions as we formulated each of the critiques. We hope that this does not prove detrimental to the quality of the text.

elaboration. External ends tend to inevitably compromise the course of treatment, involving a violence incompatible with the logic of traversing unconscious conflicts (Laplanche, 1992a). If psychoanalytic treatment has only internal ends as legitimate, all external ends would be only consequences, some of which may be socially useful and beneficial or detrimental to the family, professional, religious, etc., environment. 'Psychic health' is essentially linked to the unraveling of knots and obscurities of the subject with themselves and much less to the socially expected (practical, or performance-related) result derived from this new conscious complex. For example, a person seeks analysis, among other reasons, because they are extremely shy when speaking in public. Going through various analytical inquiries about past events, traumas, and love relationships, let's assume they have achieved a good elaboration of their desires, allowing them to speak normally to a large number of people. Does this mean they must necessarily adopt a capitalist insertion as a motivational speaker, a union member, a company director, etc.? The answer is "no". "Cure", in this case, means the absence of inhibition, enabling the subject to radically change their way of life or to maintain their previous social life, with the huge advantage of being able to speak orally when they so wish. The same reasoning applies to the cases in which the person seeks an analytical treatment in virtue of the suffering caused by the inability to complete tasks, wake up at the appropriate time, sleep, study, etc.: in the case of successfully overcoming these and countless other self-limitations, this does not imply adopting a specific way of life, whether socially approved or not.

By asserting that the social penetrates the most intimate and archaic aspects of the subject and attributing to psychoanalysis the responsibility of conforming the individual to the establishment by suspending repression, Adorno demonstrates coherence with his philosophical perspective, in which he considers the social totality as the quintessential falsity. This view is evident in *Minima Moralia*, where he declares that "human beings are always better than their culture" (MM §24), that "the whole is the non-true" (MM §29), and that "barbarism is actually the whole and still triumphs over its own spirit" (MM §70). Adorno clearly disregards the existence of an internal, intimate, and psychic falsity, whose logic could not (according to the perspective we adopt) be deduced from the collective level. The philosopher seems to neglect the living notion of repression, which is based on quantitative issues of unconscious affective investments in early childhood and a series of vicissitudes in the logic of individual psychic structure, situated below the cultural level. By taking into account this internal negative logic of the psyche and its unconscious, it becomes clear that much of the *raison d'être* of the psychoanalytical treatment

consists of achieving degrees and forms of clarification of internal, intra-subjective impasses, leaving open to each person the countless possibilities resulting from this journey. These possibilities can vary from adaptations to society (as Adorno criticizes), to revolutionary-political positions, phlegmatic detachment, identity criticism, and much more. It is essential to enable each individual sufficient freedom of choice regarding what they want to be, without indoctrinating them into this or that specific way of life. The person must have a minimally satisfactory pulsional plasticity to identify with prevailing social values or criticize them deeply, alter their conception, or deny them altogether, and so on. In short, psychoanalysis does not have a purpose of edification or moral, political, philosophical, or any other kind of formation.

At this moment, it is relevant for us to substantiate two of our aforementioned assertions, namely, regarding the connection of the sense of psychoanalytic treatment to degrees and forms of clarification of intra-subjective impasses and about the greater freedom of choice resulting from a successful analysis, for they will resurface in the remainder of this text. Both are connected to what is stated in this oft-cited passage of Freud, wherein we read that the purpose of psychoanalysis is to “strengthen the ego, make it independent of the superego, broaden its field of perception, and improve its organization, so as to be able to appropriate new portions of the id. Where it was id, it must become ego.” (Freud, 1999b, p. 86) The notions of strengthening the ego, independence from the superego, and broadening the field of perception align seamlessly with another Freudian formulation:

The assertion that repression can prevent the transposition of drive-impulses into affective manifestations is of particular interest to us. It indicates that the *Cs* system typically dominates both affectivity and access to motility; it also underscores the significance of repression by demonstrating, as a consequence of repression, the blockade not only of consciousness but also of the development of affect and the motivation of muscular activity. In a formulation in the opposite direction, we can state: as long as the *Cs* system dominates affectivity and motility, we designate the psychic state of the individual as normal. (Freud, 1999d, pp. 277-8)

In both passages, it becomes clear that the neurotic situation is constituted by a imprisoning subjugation of the ego (or the *Pcs/Cs* system, according to the respective topic) to unconscious impulses, and psychic normality is linked to an increase in control, independence, and thus, freedom from them. However, this notion of freedom is not merely a conjecture on our part, as Freud explicitly employs it when discussing the neurotic condition. In addressing obsessive neurosis, he asserts: “the entire situation ends in an ever-increasing degree of indecision, loss of energy, and restriction of freedom” (Freud, 1999f, p. 267).

When Freud states that the aim of psychoanalysis is to “broaden the field of perception of the ego” — which, in context, refers to perception related to the unconscious realm — he is essentially reiterating a formulation posited as a foundational principle of psychoanalytic practice. Namely, that “always and everywhere the meaning of symptoms is unknown to the patient, and regular analysis demonstrates that these symptoms constitute derivatives of unconscious processes, yet, under varied favorable circumstances, can become conscious” (Freud, 1999f, pp. 288-9). This cognitive perspective, centered on elucidating the unconscious meaning of symptoms, is immediately tied to the practical-clinical realm, as the disappearance of symptoms follows from it:

However, it is also necessary for this meaning to be unconscious for the symptom to arise. Symptoms are never constructed from conscious processes; as soon as the relevant unconscious processes have become conscious, the symptom must disappear. Here, you promptly discern a means to reach therapy, a way to make the symptoms disappear. (Freud, 1999f, p. 289).

On the other hand, it is evident that the aim is not to achieve an infinite, absolute freedom from unconscious contents. As we have repeatedly discussed throughout this article, it is at stake degrees and forms of drive-plasticity and, thus, of freedom of the individual from their unconscious as a desirable outcome of analytic treatment. The suspension of repression intended by psychoanalysis can never be total but only in more desirable degrees and forms. As Laplanche (1992b, p. 59) puts it, “when it comes to repression, it is the same representation that, from conscious, becomes unconscious; but when it comes to bringing back to knowledge, to re-acknowledge the repressed, one will never ‘detach it’ from its unconscious inscription. Thus, we see that the double movement is not symmetrical at all; there is no symmetrical ‘un-repression’ to the process of repression.” — Due to the extent of this article, we are unable to delve deeper into the exposition of these topics, as a considerable number of considerations is necessary to better qualify the understanding of the meaning of symptoms, the pathways of their acquisition, the connection with the real situation, the process of working through (*Durcharbeit*), etc.

Coming back to the analysis of *Minima Moralia*, it is important to note the inadequacy of the accusation that psychoanalysis denies the patient the “escape into illness.” In the *Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*, Lecture XXIV, Freud presents several examples of people whose neurosis plays a significant role in their lives. Furthermore, he categorically denies that the aim of psychoanalytic treatment is to combat all and any symptoms. This Adorno’s



critique of psychoanalysis could only be justified in light of some other theoretical reference beyond Freud, as, in relation to Freud, it is inadequate.

It is essential to grant Adorno, however, that neurotic symptoms can indeed express nonconformity, resistance, and significant differentiation of the subject in the face of the homogenizing and co-opting oppression of the social system. For example, a worker subjected to an excessively exhausting work schedule may develop a symptom strong enough to prompt them to quit the job, while their conscious will would prevent them from doing so, due to ideological, religious, family tradition, or other factors. The same volitional logic of resistance can be applied to abusive romantic relationships, toxic family bonds, alienating social circles, and various other similar situations.

Among the various issues deserving criticism in these contexts, two stand out as particularly relevant. The first concerns the fact that individual refusals of oppressive and violent situations, through neurotic symptoms, occur blindly, without sufficient knowledge of their foundations, and therefore, in an unfree manner. There are no guarantees that in each of these cases, a critical and transformative action in the context would not be possible and desirable—or at least a refusal in a more advantageous time and form—instead of a denial forced by the neurotic symptom. The second issue is the inappropriateness of elevating, as a general evaluative principle for all symptoms, the possibility of denying oppressive situations. The same unconscious drive that leads an individual to deny a situation of parental abuse may make them incapable of dealing with affective demands in beneficial and healthy relationships. Once again, the subjective determination by unconscious impulses is unaware of their social, affective, economic, or any other validity or invalidity. Therefore, we reaffirm that what is genuinely relevant is the psychoanalytic clarification of unconscious motives, enabling the subject to reflect as freely as possible on their ties to reality, allowing them to overcome, to some extent and in some way, the imprisonment imposed by their unconscious.

A relevant conceptual aspect in this aphorism is a philosophical association between individual neurotic suffering and a supposed “truth” of the individual in the face of the falsity of social, collective, capitalist homogenization, and so on. Adorno’s intention is commendable and legitimate: to do justice to the particular, to defend its claim to truth in the face of a myriad of power relations sedimented in cultural forms of thought, action, beauty, desire, and many others. However, intention alone does not guarantee the philosophical legitimacy of what is done, as its realization may include partialities, fallacies, or other inaccuracies. Adorno approaches human suffering from a somewhat detached perspective, a kind of “philosophizing,” without being grounded in something analogous

to the clinical experience with its intimate, internal, and empirical connection to the impasses and knots of other people's desires. He engages in something typically criticized by Freud in philosophical thinking, namely, the withdrawal into his reasoning activity, constructing a comprehensive worldview, a sort of castle with conceptual bricks, without empirically traversing the concreteness of the entanglement of the psyche of the other.

Indeed, neurotic suffering represents a "truth" of the subject, in the sense of revealing the uniqueness of the impasses of their fantasies, traumas, censures, and unconscious desires. However, this truth should not be defended against the false nature of social normality, as Adorno does, because it is only a truth for the subject themselves, a testimony of what led to their singular suffering. To a large extent, recognizing this truth is one of the crucial steps in overcoming this subjective knot, which causes suffering, anguish, imprisonment, a vital diminishment, an endless martyrdom. If Adorno had come into clinical contact with the logic of the constitution of this subjective truth, he would have had the opportunity to realize that overcoming the symptoms does not mean the annulment of that truth or its replacement by collective falsity. Rather, it means the subject's escape, in some degrees and in some forms, from the entanglement of their unconscious forces. In order to do "justice to the particular" in the realm of psychic suffering, one needs to perceive the unique "granulation" of this condition through a technique capable of highlighting the historical objectivity of the associative web of representations and their affects, which constitute the subject in their current singular reality.

In aphorism 37, Adorno accuses Freud of being simultaneously libertarian in relation to sexuality and an apologist for repressive social values, as well as disregarding sexual perversions and spirituality. To respond to this criticism, it is necessary to emphasize the ambivalent and explosive nature of the unconscious core of the psyche. As Freud stated, it is from the unconscious that energy arises that can lead to both the most sublime cultural achievements and the greatest misfortunes of psychic suffering, violence, disrespect, and endless greed (Freud, 1999d). The selfish nature of sexuality, as addressed by Freud, is not a moral qualification but rather an indicative of the underlying psychic logic. For example, a reactive formation, such as the obsession to line up glasses perfectly against the kitchen wall, is considered "selfish" because it follows a motivation embedded in the unconscious, causing the subject to endlessly revolve around a solipsistic demand whose meaning they are unaware of and, therefore, unable to overcome. When Freud praises the "social value" of certain productions achieved through sublimation, he mainly indicates psychic health as the sufficient capacity of the subject to open up to the world, to relate to other people, and to transcend a

neurotic, unconscious, and self-centered satisfaction that is perpetually reiterated and inflexible.<sup>12</sup> On the other hand, Freud has defended himself several times, as in the *Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*, against the accusation that his science aims to promote unbridled sexual liberation. In fact, it is about granting each individual sufficient discernment about the intimate motivations of their sexuality, allowing more freedom of choice regarding their objects and forms of pleasure; it is not about advocating libertine practices.

There are two specific points to consider:

1) Adorno quotes a passage from Freud's Lecture XXI, where Freud talks about perversions in the "Lebeweltthe living world", mistakenly interpreting this statement as the author's disdain for such practices. The real meaning of the passage is to validate the fundamental conception of psychoanalysis that sexuality goes far beyond genital relationships, including the organ pleasure, hysterical symptoms, and perversions, even when they are not directly linked to sexual organs (see Freud, 1999f, pp. 335-6).

2) The excerpt from "The Future of an Illusion" cited by Adorno, which calls for leaving the heavens to angels and sparrows, cannot be interpreted as a disdain for culture itself. In fact, it is a specific criticism of subjective investment in an afterlife, which Freud considers a waste of psychic energy: "by withdrawing their expectations from the afterlife and concentrating the forces thus liberated on earthly life, human beings will probably succeed in making life tolerable for all and culture no longer repressive" (Freud, 1999g, pp. 373-4).

The central theme of aphorism 38 is *Genußfähigkeit*, the capacity for enjoyment or pleasure. To address Adorno's criticism, it is important to focus on the neurotic situation characterized by the inability to experience pleasure. According to Freud, many people suffer from a floating anxiety, without a specific reason or object, a diffuse expectation of something bad about to happen. These individuals would live in a state of chronic pessimism, always seeing the negative side of everything, and, ultimately, being unable to experience pleasure in anything (Freud, 1999f, Lecture XXV). Again, similar to the response to aphorism 36, the analytical work seeks to clarify the unconscious conflicts that underlie the anguish that permeates the lives of these individuals, in order to

12 The term "self-centering" here refers to the fact that the meaning of symptoms is highly individualized, linked to each person's life history, so that only they can provide the clues to unravel the knots and unconscious impasses. Freud speaks of typical symptoms, as well as dreams and parapraxis, but the "historical interpretation," linked to the individual origin of symptoms, is of crucial importance (Freud, 1999f, p. 278). This self-centering was succinctly expressed by Freud when highlighting the similarities and analogies between obsessive acts and religious rituals, stating that "one could conceive neurosis as individual religiosity, and religion as universal neurosis" (Freud, 1999h, pp. 18-9).

answer the question: “why am I led to see only the worst side of life?”. The goal of psychoanalytic treatment is not to indoctrinate the patient to seek superficial pleasures, frivolous parties, or a life of luxury. The success of the treatment lies in the possibility of overcoming the pessimistic outlook through a deep understanding of these internal conflicts, restoring or enabling enough freedom to appreciate or not appreciate anything without pre-judgments. At this point, Adorno’s criticism is more valid when read in reference to the revisionists, whose validation of socially approved ways of a good life is more evident. This is clear in Karen Horney’s text *New Ways in Psychoanalysis* and Adorno’s commentary in his text “Revised Psychoanalysis.” The idea of restoring *Genußfähigkeit*, as originally conceived by Freud and read in a progressive manner, does not preconize specific objects of pleasure. To take it in such a general way implies bypassing the mediation of the unconscious between individual conscious desire and social offers of satisfaction.

The central argument that the mediation through psychoanalytic treatment, involving speech, discursive articulation, listening, and the other’s responses, would lead to a falsification of enjoyment with the object, also does not seem valid. On the contrary, the process of speaking aims to dissolve and overcome the barriers imposed by unconscious complexes on the subject’s relationship with objects of pleasure. Psychoanalytic treatment establishes itself as a slow, progressive linguistic mediation, with back-and-forth movements, oscillations, and cycles alternating and repeating on different planes, built in the relationship between patient and analyst. This mediation seeks to overcome blind, compulsive, distressing, and often obsessive approaches that the ocean of unconscious desiring complexes imposes. It is important to recognize that linguistic practice in psychoanalytic treatment is a complex and dynamic process, subject to cuts, corrections, and additions. The final outcome of the treatment will largely depend on what each patient makes of the formulations expressed and heard throughout the journey. Certainly, one cannot claim absolute freedom for the analysand in relation to these elaborations, but neither can they be generally censured as falsifiers. The language used in psychoanalytic treatment serves as a tool to deepen the subject’s understanding of their internal conflicts, desires, and anxieties. Through verbal expression and active listening from the analyst, the patient can find ways to reframe their experiences and traumas, allowing for greater openness to new forms of enjoyment and pleasure, free, to some extent, from the oppressive restraints of the unconscious.

Aphorism 39, “the ego is the id,” addresses a fundamental point for a philosophy of psychoanalytic practice as a whole. Adorno criticizes the reification and annihilation of the subject when taken as an object of analysis

and treatment. He associates this “objectification” of the subject with the objectifying-reifying character of abstract labor in capitalism, considering them to reinforce each other. This perspective can be seen as excessively exogenous and therefore partial. Although it is true that the subject is taken as an object of knowledge and analytic action, the internal logic of this “objectification” of the subject is very distinct from that prevailing in the expropriation of labor and individuality in capitalism. The latter does not aim to overcome the state of alienation of the worker but rather to perpetuate and even deepen it. In a radically different way, I say that the analytical endeavor is a counteraction to a true “violence” suffered by the conscious sphere. This violence I interpret as the one the individual experiences in the compulsion to repeat thoughts and actions without reasonable grounds, to feel huge amount of anxiety, to be incapable of experience pleasure with good things in life, etc., due to the complex of traumas, censures, fantasies, and unconscious impulses. In the analytical treatment, it is not a matter of finding a way — among countless others — through which the subject “interprets” and understands themselves, but rather a slow and coordinated effort of “untranslating,” undoing knots, impasses, blocks, and obscurities rooted in an ancestral, contradictory, and opposed-to-linguistically-structured thought logic.<sup>13</sup> The subject needs to be the object of knowledge and analytic action to be able, to some extent and in some way, to cease being a prisoner of their unconscious forces and their unyielding logic. Adorno’s argumentation, once again, suggests a psychic constitution with a descriptive unconscious, endowed with less and more profound layers, the latter being non-conscious, beyond the waking perception but not with its own force and logic, discrepant from conscious thought, and, most importantly, capable of fatally overwhelming the subject. An example can illustrate the relevance of the unconscious and its influence on human behavior: suppose a person always stutters heavily when speaking to others but speaks with perfect diction when alone. A neurophysiological cause for stuttering is ruled out from the outset because otherwise, they would not speak normally when alone. If the patient associates the difficulty of speech with early traumatic childhood experiences (such as forced oral sex with an adult, for example), and if such association leads to overcoming the difficulty of communicating with others, we can safely say that the unconscious core of their psyche does not only constitute a “below-consciousness,” a “not-yet-known,” requiring an investigation “to get there,” but rather a “block” of active and challenging forces, whose influence on the

13 Concerning psychoanalysis as an anti-hermeneutic endeavor, that is to say, as a pursuit of “untranslation,” refer to Jean Laplanche, 1999b.

subject has its own meaning and logic<sup>14</sup> and can be described as enslaving: as if their entire conscious being (with their choices, values, ideas, feelings, etc.) becomes a mere object, a puppet, something weak, helpless, and without instruments of struggle, constrained and restrained by a power that permeates and imposes itself upon them. Thus, psychoanalysis postulates the unconscious as an active and determining instance, not only as something that needs to be investigated to be known but as a force that deeply influences and can enslave the subject.<sup>15</sup>

The relevance of philosophical, scientific, doctrinal, and self-conscious reflections in alleviating neurotic suffering is undeniable. However, Freud's psychoanalytic studies and those of his followers demonstrated the need to develop a specific investigative technique with its own conceptual framework, focused on the psychic core resistant to the prevailing logic in the conscious sphere. Taking the subject as a 'psychoanalytic object' means recognizing the already-existing condition of consciousness as an object of unconscious forces, and its unraveling through the untranslating of conscious contents produced during the analysis represents the quintessential means to liberate the subject from the enslavement imposed by their unconscious, according to the entire psychoanalytic tradition.

In aphorism 42, Adorno criticizes the technique of free association as the annihilation of critical resistance of thought, turning it into mere passive material to be classified and domesticated by theory. This critique is directly related to the argument presented in aphorism 39, as both address the issue of the loss of the individual's subjectivity, transforming their thinking into a mere instrument or material to be used, instead of being the foundation for their critical and reflective autonomy.

By establishing the fundamental rule of free association, psychoanalysis assumes that not every thought has a liberating value when directly criticizing the violence exerted on the subject. If we seriously consider the psychoanalytic precept that thinking is the arrival point of opaque, enmeshed, contradictory, and emotionally invested mechanisms subjected to extremely "hard" unconscious traumas (a conception quite akin to various Nietzschean formulations), we see the emergence of the possibility that thinking itself may be a symptom and

14 That neurotic symptoms, no matter how absurd they may appear, possess a meaning, constitutes a fundamental element within the realm of psychoanalytic theory. This assertion, advocated by Freud explicitly in his work "Das Unbewusste" ["The Unconscious"], stands as a pivotal cornerstone.

15 Needless to say, instances such as this can be elucidated through alternative approaches, such as the behavioral, cognitive-behavioral, phenomenological, and so forth. What we contend is that these attributes indeed furnish elements highly conducive to the embracement of the unconscious hypothesis.

should be investigated in its internal genesis. The renunciation of censorship during the analytical process, allowing free association, aims to transform thinking into material to be explored, especially to identify connections between spontaneous ideas and latent contents more directly related to the unconscious psychic core. However, this procedure should not result in a simplistic or domesticating classification, as criticized by Adorno in aphorism 40, when considering revisionist formulations. Each set of spontaneous elaborations (*Einfälle*) must be read in its singularity, respecting the unique logic of articulation that differentiates one subject from another throughout their life experiences. It is undeniable that Adorno is correct in emphasizing the external violence (stemming from the non-truthful social whole) upon individualities as determinants of their being. However, if he were to recognize the internal violence exerted by the unconscious, based on a *sui generis* logic, resistant to conscious ideative content, which in fact leads to considering any form of thinking as a possible neurotic symptom — including philosophical, sociological, anthropological theories, and so on — then he could acknowledge free association as a means of exposing the ‘attack’ coming from psychic interiority, enabling conscious thought to advance towards substantive psychic plasticity and freedom, instead of blindly expressing unconscious contents.<sup>16</sup> Psychoanalysis, as a theory and clinical technique, seeks to explore this ‘negative logic’ of the unconscious and its overwhelming force, providing a path to understanding and overcoming psychic suffering, and enabling the subject to achieve greater autonomy and freedom in their choices, thoughts, modes of satisfaction, and other aspects of life.

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16 If every thought can, in principle, be a neurotic symptom, what can be said about the very formulation of being free from unconscious contents? Naturally, it does not exempt itself from this possibility. It too must undergo analysis in each case, being the subject of critical investigation into its foundations, its connections with other formulations, and so forth. Psychoanalytic critiques of the psyche do not exist on a plane alien to the movement of the psyche itself; they are subjected to what is critique-worthy in all psychic life. This implies that all psychoanalytic formulations must always be reflected upon in all instances of their utilization. On the other hand, the endlessly reiterated repositioning of such a critical movement would lead to an exhaustion of any theoretical and even practical stance on the psychoanalytic object.



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