

Pleasure Principle

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Without Abstract

Definition

A principle governing human psychological functioning, whereby unpleasure drives psychological and behavioral activity.

Introduction

Freud called this the “unpleasure principle” for years (Strachey [1966](#)). He was always clear that the preponderant driver of subjective experience and of motor action was unpleasure.

“Sensations of a pleasurable nature have not anything inherently impelling about them, whereas unpleasurable ones have it in the highest degree. The latter impel towards change, towards discharge, and that is why we interpret unpleasure as implying a heightening and pleasure a lowering of energetic cathexis...Let us call what becomes conscious as pleasure and unpleasure a quantitative and qualitative ‘something’ ...This ‘something’ behaves like a repressed impulse. It can exert driving force without the ego noticing the compulsion. Not until there is resistance to the compulsion, a hold-up in the discharge-reaction, does the ‘something’ at once become conscious as unpleasure.” (Freud [1966a](#)) Freud viewed the pleasure principle as a key to the “economic” point of view (Freud [1966b](#)).

Undischarged instinctual impulses increased unbound energy. Pleasure was the subjective experience of gratification, which lowered excitation, a “psychophysiological” concept. Another way of stating the pleasure principle was that, “The work of the mental apparatus is directed towards keeping the quantity of excitation low. Anything that is calculated to increase that quantity is bound to be felt as adverse to the functioning of the apparatus, that is as unpleasurable. The pleasure principle follows from the principle of constancy.” (Freud [1966b](#))

Finally, the pleasure principle was constantly regulated by the reality principle. “This latter principle does not abandon the intention of ultimately obtaining pleasure, but it nevertheless demands and carries into effect the postponement of satisfaction, the abandonment of a number of possibilities of gaining satisfaction and the temporary toleration of unpleasure as a step on the long indirect road to pleasure.” (Freud [1966b](#))

Recent Views on the Pleasure Principle

What might be the twenty-first century view of the pleasure principle? Is it grounded in twenty-first century “psychophysiology”? The neuropsychoanalytic view is that Panksepp’s SEEKING system provides the “goad without a goal” (Panksepp and Biven [2012](#)) that demands animals explore their environment. SEEKING is a dopaminergic pathway running from the ventral tegmental area through the basal forebrain, including hypothalamus, to the nucleus accumbens. SEEKING is tuned by lateral hypothalamic inputs to orient it towards the inner states that demand satisfaction (Panksepp [1998](#)). These goals include food, water, sex, and relationships (Johnson [2008](#)). As a person grows hungry, unconscious tension increases. If one smells dinner, one may recognize the wish to eat, gratify it, and go on to the next goal. With a holdup in gratification, the wish to eat may grow unpleasant and demanding. Skipping lunch may result in one spending hours thinking about dinner. However, the pleasure of eating is modulated by other factors, mostly opioid activation (Johnson [2008](#)). SEEKING and drive gratification triggering opioid receptor activation must be activated sequentially for the lowering of energy involved in drive reduction (Johnson [2013](#)).

Wanting and liking are instantiated by different neural systems (Robinson and Berridge [1993](#)). This conflict may be what lies beyond the pleasure principle (Johnson [2008](#)). If we urgently want things because the SEEKING system has been modified over time by unpleasant experiences, one may find oneself unconsciously and intentionally affiliating with abusive partners. We would all assume, if we did not know neuroscience, that we want what we like. Neurotic conflict might be described as SEEKING relationships that are exactly what we want, but we find them dysfunctional and aversive (Johnson [2008](#)). One might use the transference to show the patient that the relationship with the analyst has been constructed to be unpleasurable.

Finally, the dominance of unpleasure can be used to understand addiction. Taking cigarettes as an example, let us posit that one smokes one after another because of “something.” Why? “This ‘something’ behaves like a repressed impulse. It can exert driving force without the ego noticing the compulsion. Not until there is resistance to the compulsion, a hold-up in the discharge-reaction, does the ‘something’ at once become conscious as unpleasure.” Cigarettes are used compulsively without much conscious consideration. Unpleasure is the driver of constant cigarette use. The smoker notices how uncomfortable they are when they can’t smoke on an airplane. When they get off, they are dying for a cigarette. Each cigarette is an unconscious submission to domination by the cigarette companies. Their business model is to torture their customers until they use the drug again. The decrease in energy in the mental apparatus when the nicotine is inhaled is experienced as “pleasure.” However, there is not the full drive gratification that would be typical of shopping (SEEKING), cooking (SEEKING), and then eating dinner (opioidergic gratification). Smoking cigarettes may be salient because of unpleasure without being a fully satisfying experience. Therefore it is done over and over with relatively little relief.

Conclusion

It helps understand the pleasure principle to keep in mind that unpleasure is actually the more important aspect of the pleasure/unpleasure continuum. Neuropsychoanalysis has elaborated and extended the concept of the pleasure principle. The pleasure principle remains an important aspect of understanding human experience.

Cross-References

[Drive Theory](#)
[Instincts and Tension Reduction](#)
[Psychoanalysis](#)
[Psychodynamic Perspective](#)
[Reality Principle](#)

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