

progress and the death drive¹

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Philosophical anthropology and the philosophy of history are deeply intertwined in post-Kantian European thought, including in psychoanalysis. Indeed, the ambivalent philosophical anthropology found in the late Freud and developed more fully in the work of Melanie Klein has distinctive implications for thinking about history and the prospects for social transformation. In particular, the assumption of the death drive—an assumption that emerged in Freud's late work *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*² but was arguably first fully integrated into psychoanalytic theory through the work of Klein—is often presumed to entail the impossibility of historical progress, and thus the futility of all attempts to improve the human condition. As Klein put it:

The repeated attempts that have been made to improve humanity—and in particular to make it more peaceable—have failed, because nobody has understood the full depth and vigour of the instincts of aggression innate in each individual. Such efforts do not seek to do more than encourage the positive, well-wishing impulses of the person while denying or suppressing his aggressive ones. And so they have been doomed to failure from the beginning.³

Not surprisingly, then, initial skepticism about the prospects for fusing Marxism and psychoanalysis, one of the key aims of the early Frankfurt School, turned

precisely on the difficulties of integrating the death drive into the materialist conception of history. Indeed, Freud himself drew on the notion of the death drive in order to heap scorn on the Marxist political project: “Aggressiveness was not created by property. It reigned almost without limit in primitive times, when property was still very scanty, and it already shows itself in the nursery almost before property has given up its primal, anal form.”⁴ The attempt to eliminate private property in the name of progress and freedom, then, may well lead to new directions for the development of civilization, but, Freud insists laconically, “one thing we can expect, and that is that this indestructible feature of human nature will follow it there” (CD 114).

The assumption that the death drive, construed as an “indestructible feature of human nature,” undermines the possibility of historical progress is closely connected to the view of the late Freud as a conservative cultural pessimist. For example, Erich Fromm, in a fascinating and unfortunately largely forgotten essay on Freud’s philosophical anthropology, writes:

In the second phase of his work, after the first World War, Freud’s picture of history became truly tragic. Progress, beyond a certain point, is no longer simply bought at great expense, but is in principle impossible. Man is only a battlefield on which the life and death instincts fight against each other. He can never liberate himself decisively from the tragic alternative of destroying others or himself.⁵

In his own work, Fromm rejected the death drive because he thought that it was incompatible with the political vision of universal peace and harmony that he took from the Hebrew prophets.⁶ Thus, the presumed incompatibility of the death drive and historical progress is also at the heart of the revisionist critique of Freud that gave rise to the cultural and interpersonal schools of psychoanalysis. Karen Horney put the point succinctly when she noted that the death drive “paralyzes any effort to search in the specific cultural conditions for reasons which make for destructiveness. It must also paralyze efforts to change anything in these conditions. If man is inherently destructive and consequently unhappy, why strive for a better future?”⁷

But is the death drive in fact incompatible with any and all claims about the possibility of progress?⁸ In what follows, I will address this question by first considering the most sustained and well worked out attempt within the Frankfurt School

tradition to avoid this pessimistic conclusion about the possibility of progress while retaining the concept of the death drive: Herbert Marcuse's *Eros and Civilization*. Even if I can't quite bring myself to share Marcuse's speculative, utopian vision of progress beyond the performance principle, for reasons I discuss below, I don't think that this means we have to be left mired in cultural pessimism or conservatism. I attempt to show why this is the case through a re-reading of key passages from Freud's *Civilization and Its Discontents*. Although my main aim in what follows is to explore whether a Kleinian understanding of the death drive can be reconciled with some conception of progress, a subsidiary goal is to counter the standard reading of the late Freud as a cultural pessimist without resorting to characterizing him as a defender of the Enlightenment. I do this by arguing that the late Freud is better understood as a thinker in the radical enlightenment tradition whose approach to the question of project is in the service of a project of critique. Finally, drawing on the work of Klein and Adorno, I briefly sketch a less speculative and utopian conception of progress as a moral-political imperative, one that is, I argue, compatible with the assumption of the death drive.

REGRESSION AS PROGRESS IN MARCUSE

As speculative and utopian as Marcuse's reading of psychoanalysis is, it nevertheless rests on a sophisticated and perceptive understanding of Freud's work and its philosophical implications. For instance, unlike those readers of Freud who either reject him for his cultural pessimism or declare him as a defender of the Enlightenment, Marcuse perceptively highlights the fundamental ambivalence at work in Freud's philosophical anthropology: "The concept of man that emerges from Freudian theory is the most irrefutable indictment of Western civilization—and at the same time the most unshakeable defense of this civilization."⁹ Similarly, like Horkheimer and Adorno, who noted in a famous passage of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* that "humanity had to inflict terrible injuries on itself before the self... was created, and something of this process is repeated in every childhood,"¹⁰ Marcuse takes seriously Freud's idea that "civilization is based on the permanent subjugation of the human instincts" (EC 3). In other words, if civilization is based on the subjugation of instinct, then this means that the domination of inner nature is a precondition of progress, which means that increasing progress paradoxically entails increasing unfreedom and domination (EC 4). This link explains why, as Marcuse put the point in a later set of lectures, "domination is the internal logic of the development of civilization."¹¹

However, Marcuse famously questions not the *connection* between progress and domination in civilization but rather its *inevitability*. Famously historicizing Freud's analysis of the clash between drives and civilization, Marcuse argues in *Eros and Civilization* that the interrelation between domination and progress is not the principle of civilization per se, but rather of a "specific historical organization of human existence" (EC 4-5). Reading Freud's metapsychology, including his late vision of the ambivalent antagonism between life and death drives, as a concrete insight into "the *historical* structure of civilization" (EC 6), Marcuse sets out to argue first, that Freud's own theory is at odds with his explicit denial of the possibility of a non-repressive civilization, and, second, that historical conditions are such that our repressive civilization has created the necessary preconditions for the abolition of repression (EC 5).

With respect to this first argument, Marcuse aims to uncover what he calls "the hidden trend in psychoanalysis" (EC 19). Marcuse argues that the central conflict in Freud's work and the key to its implications for social theory is the triumph of the reality principle over the pleasure principle and over the drives in general. Although necessary for the functioning of civilization, this triumph is also "the great traumatic event in the development of man" at both the ontogenetic and phylogenetic levels (EC 15). Freud himself saw the struggle between the pleasure and reality principles as eternally antagonistic; thus, Marcuse claims, "the notion that a non-repressive civilization is impossible is a cornerstone of Freudian theory" (EC 17). However—and this is the hidden trend that Marcuse identifies in psychoanalysis—Freudian theory contains aspects that challenge this pessimistic conclusion. More specifically, Freud's metapsychology not only uncovers but also implicitly calls into question the necessity of the internal connection between progress and domination.

With respect to the second argument, Marcuse's aim is to exploit this hidden trend in psychoanalysis by historicizing Freudian concepts. Echoing critiques of Freud offered by Fromm, Horkheimer, and Adorno, Marcuse admits that Freud's own theory is insufficiently historical insofar as he generalizes from a specific historical form of the reality principle—the one that holds sway in modern, bourgeois, European cultures—to reality per se. Although Freud offers a valid historical generalization when he claims that up to now "civilization has progressed as organized *domination*" (EC 34), this does not justify the conclusion that such domination is historically *necessary*. Thus, Marcuse proposes to unfold the historical content of Freud's concepts through the introduction of two key terms:

the performance principle, which refers to the prevailing historical form of the reality principle, the form demanded by capitalism according to which individuals must delay gratification of their libidinal drives in order to engage in productive, alienated labor; and surplus repression, which refers to the amount of repression above and beyond the level required for the basic functioning of civilization and which instead serves to maintain the structures of social domination unique to modern capitalism.

Whereas Freud seems to accept the fact that progress proceeds through repression and domination—the triumph of the reality principle, the mastery of the id by the ego, the repression of sensuous drives by reason, the domination and subversion of freedom—Marcuse calls for a transformation of this dynamic, a “reversal of the direction of progress” (EC xiv) by means of which progress becomes regression to the archaic, to imagination, to phantasy—in short, to pleasure. Noting that the pleasure principle “was dethroned not only because it militated against progress in civilization but also because it militated against a civilization whose progress perpetuates domination and toil” (EC 40), Marcuse identifies eros—specifically, eros prior to its repressive organization in genital sexuality, understood as the polymorphous perversity of bodies and pleasures—as the source of the explosive force that is in conflict with a repressive civilization. “Against a society which employs sexuality as a means for a useful end,” Marcuse writes, “the perversions uphold sexuality as an end in itself; they thus place themselves outside the dominion of the performance principle and challenge its very foundation” (EC 50).

Unlike Freud, then, who thought that the direction of civilization could not be reversed, Marcuse calls for a regressive conception of progress beyond the rule of the performance principle. Ironically, he notes, such a vision of progress has become possible only because of the achievements of the performance principle, which have allowed us to develop the relations of production and the technological capacities for satisfying everyone’s needs. Nevertheless, progress in Marcuse’s new sense also means leaving the performance principle behind. This new sense of progress also contrasts with what Marcuse calls repressive desublimation, the merely apparent liberation of eros that in fact serves to uphold the system by releasing just enough pressure to keep it functioning. By contrast, the genuine liberation of eros “would necessarily operate as a destructive, fatal force—as the total negation of the principle which governs the repressive reality” (EC 95).

Under these conditions, Marcuse contends that regression—understood as regression behind the level of civilized rationality, which was formed through the repressive imposition of the reality principle—becomes progressive, it “assumes a progressive function” (EC 19). The regressive liberation of our libidinal, instinctual past aims not at a reconciliation with the present but rather at a radical critique of it; by invoking critical standards that are ruled out in the present, with its focus on productivity and self-renunciation, regression orients itself toward the future and becomes utopian (EC 19). Instead of repressive de-sublimation we would have non-repressive sublimation, the channeling of libidinal and erotic energies into all aspects of social life. This non-repressive sublimation would harness the culture-building, pro-social dimensions of eros—which is transformed through this process from aim-inhibited, repressed, genitally organized sexuality into a polymorphous eroticism—in the service of the free, playful creativity of phantasy, the imagination, and the aesthetic. The result would be what Inara Luisa Marin calls Marcuse’s “libidinal utopia.”¹²

However, if the conflict that Freud envisioned between civilization and the drives can be ameliorated in the case of libidinal drives via this transformation of sexuality into eros, this still leaves the death drive for Marcuse to contend with. And here, the stakes and degree of difficulty are much higher. Indeed, Marcuse notes that “it is mainly the death instinct that seems to defy any hypothesis of a non-repressive civilization: the very existence of such an instinct seems to engender ‘automatically’ the whole network of constraints and controls instituted by civilization; innate destructiveness must beget perpetual repression” (EC 134). Again, Marcuse’s solution is to historicize Freudian concepts. If the death drive “tends toward that state of ‘constant gratification’ where no tension is felt—a state without want”—if, in other words, it is understood in classically Freudian terms as a manifestation of the Nirvana principle—then this means, for Marcuse, that “this trend of the instinct implies that its *destructive* manifestations would be minimized as it approached such a state” (EC 234). In other words, as we realize the Marcusean utopian society that is totally free from material want, tension will increasingly dissipate and the resulting destructive manifestations of the death drive melt away. If the objective of the death drive is the absence of tension, then “paradoxically, in terms of the instinct, the conflict between life and death is the more reduced, the closer life approximates the state of gratification. Pleasure principle and Nirvana principle then converge” (EC 235).

From the vantage point of 60 years after the publication of *Eros and Civilization*, there is much to take issue with in Marcuse's attempt to reconcile the drives in general, and the death drive in particular, with the possibility of progress.¹³ As Eva von Redecker points out, "Marcuse's solution—to present the erotic energy bound by repressed sexuality as a revolutionary force—falters in the light of Foucault's *History of Sexuality, Volume 1* which refutes any attempts to situate sexuality outside social power dynamics."¹⁴ Although I share von Redecker's skepticism about Marcuse's romantic celebration of regression to polymorphously perverse eroticism and his claim that this constitutes progress, the crucial point for our purposes lies elsewhere. As I see it, the crucial point has to do with Marcuse's assumption that the destructive manifestations of the death drive could be thoroughly disarmed or dissolved through the elimination of material want or scarcity. As Joel Whitebook has argued, this assumption rests on a conflation of the idea of material scarcity with Freud's notion of Ananke (reality or necessity). The latter is actually much broader in scope than material scarcity. As Whitebook explains, citing some famous lines from Freud's *Future of an Illusion*, Ananke for Freud signals the fact that

through inevitable loss, physical pain, and death, nature will always rise 'up against us, majestic, cruel and inexorable' and remind us of our 'helplessness and weakness, which we thought to escape through the work of civilization'. Whatever level of abundance might be achieved—and material well-being is nothing to scoff at—human beings will still be confronted with the 'ineluctable', which will always administer an insult to our self-esteem.¹⁵

In other words, even if, and of course this is a big if, the satisfaction of all basic physical and economic needs could be achieved for all, this would not mean the elimination of all tension in human life whatsoever, which means that the death drive as Marcuse envisions it would not, in fact, melt away. Moreover, one could even say, it's a good thing, too, insofar as the playful, creative, artistic utopian vision of society that Marcuse sketches could scarcely be possible without usefully channeled destructiveness—artistic creativity absent all tension, want, striving, and even iconoclastic destructiveness being difficult if not impossible to imagine. Does this mean, then, that we are stuck with the kind of cultural pessimism and conservatism that are thought to go along with the death drive? Not necessarily. To see why, I'd like to return to some key passages from Freud's *Civilization and Its Discontents*.

PROBLEMATIZING PROGRESS: FREUD AND THE RADICAL ENLIGHTENMENT

Civilization and Its Discontents is framed as an answer to the question of the meaning or purpose of life. Freud demurs on this question, suggesting it doesn't admit of an answer, but he does say that he knows quite well what most people "show by their behavior to be the purpose and intention of their lives" (CD 76), namely, happiness or pleasure. In other words, "the purpose of life is simply the programme of the pleasure principle" which "dominates the operation of the mental apparatus from the start" (CD 76). And yet, the pleasure principle finds itself opposed by the universe at every turn, which means that it must give way to the more modest reality principle; this transition is the major developmental achievement of psychological maturation for Freud. The three primary sources of unhappiness, and thus the three dimensions of reality to which the pleasure principle must yield, are the frailty of our own bodies, the dangers of the natural world, and our interactions with other people. While the first two are ineliminable because we will never be able to completely master nature, including our own bodies, the third at least seems as if it should be solvable. The fact that it has thus far proven to be intractable, and that, instead, our relations with other human beings cause perhaps the most suffering of all, suggests to Freud that "a piece of unconquerable nature may lie behind" this particular type of suffering; that piece being a piece "of our own psychical constitution" (CD 86). This leads Freud to consider the "astonishing contention" that "what we call our civilization is largely responsible for our misery, and that we should be much happier if we gave it up" (CD 86). Civilization, for Freud, means "the whole sum of the achievements and the regulations which distinguish our lives from those of our animal ancestors and which serve two purposes—namely to protect men against nature and to adjust their mutual relations" (CD 89). In other words, civilization, or Kultur, is a human creation that sets us apart from nature by allowing us to control nature—both inner and outer—and each other. As a mechanism of control or mastery, civilization is antithetical to freedom or liberty, where freedom means the freedom to act on one's basic drives in an unimpeded manner. Because freedom of this sort inevitably leads to conflicts, civilization requires submitting these drives to the control of the "higher psychical agencies, which have subjected themselves to the reality principle" (CD 79). But the challenge, as Freud sees it, is that "the feeling of happiness derived from the satisfaction of a wild instinctual impulse untamed by the ego is incomparably more intense than that derived from satiating an instinct that has been tamed" (CD 79), so the allure of unsublimated drive satisfaction remains

high.

However, not all instincts or drives are alike when it comes to their potential to create conflict and their need to be controlled by civilization. Although Freud starts his discussion with the conflict between the pleasure principle and the demands of civilization, as the discussion goes on, it becomes clear that the real problems arise *beyond* the pleasure principle. For, as Freud argues in chapter IV of *Civilization and Its Discontents*, love and necessity (Eros and Ananke) are the twin foundations of human communal life. Necessity creates the compulsion to work, which prompts human beings to master nature, and love binds men to their sexual objects and women to their children, creating families. Love, in other words, is one of the foundations of civilization; its function is to bind people together into unities; eros is pro-civilization, pro-social. It is true, of course, that conflicts arise between sexual or family unions and the needs of the larger civilization—largely due, Freud argues, to the “retarding and restraining influence” of women who aren’t very capable of sublimation and who resent men for turning their attention away from the family and toward the project of civilization building and who thus develop a hostile attitude toward civilization (CD 103-104). It is also true that civilization demands the restriction of sexual life through mechanisms such as the incest taboo, the restriction of the sexual life of children, or the compulsion toward heterosexual monogamy. Still, at the most basic level and in the broadest sense, there is no necessary conflict between Eros—defined by Freud as the desire for union, the drive to “preserve living substance and to join it into ever larger units” (CD 118)—and civilization. If anything, the conflict is between particular manifestations of Eros, different types and levels of unities—lovers versus their families, parents and children versus their communities, and so on.

Things look rather different when we get to the pivotal fifth chapter of *Civilization and Its Discontents*. Here, the central challenge and conflict between the drives and the demands of civilization emerges, and it is rooted not in Eros but in the death drive. Civilization requires affective, even erotic, bonds and cooperative relationships between large groups of individuals. However, Freud famously continues, “men are not gentle creatures who want to be loved, and who at the most can defend themselves if they are attacked; they are, on the contrary, creatures among whose instinctual endowments is to be reckoned a powerful share of aggressiveness” (CD 111). As evidence for this claim, Freud cites the combination of the basic life experience of the individual and the collective experience recorded by history and asks, reasonably enough, “Who, in the face of all his experience of

life and of history, will have the courage to dispute this assertion?” (CD 111). And it is this aggressive drive that disrupts our relations with other human beings, forcing civilization to take steps to control it. Indeed, “in consequence of this primary mutual hostility of human beings, civilized society is perpetually threatened with disintegration” (CD 112).

Although the death drive is often entwined with Eros, and it is in these sadistic forms that it is most visible, Freud also insists in his late work on the independence of the death drive. As he puts it, “even where it emerges without any sexual purpose, in the blindest fury of destructiveness, we cannot fail to recognize that the satisfaction of the instinct [to aggression] is accompanied by an extraordinarily high degree of narcissistic enjoyment, owing to its presenting the ego with a fulfillment of the latter’s old wishes for omnipotence” (CD 121). If Eros is pro-social and pro-civilization, and if the aggressive drive is opposed to Eros’s unifying project, then the history of civilization becomes a process of “struggle between Eros and Death, between the instinct of life and the instinct of destruction, as it works itself out in the human species” (CD 122).

To be sure, Freud also argues that civilization has means at its disposal to inhibit or otherwise ameliorate the aggressive instincts. By far the most effective of the means that it employs to this end is the development of the superego, which is formed through the introjection or internalization of aggression. Through this process aggressiveness takes the form of “conscience,” enacting “the same harsh aggressiveness that the ego would have liked to satisfy upon other, extraneous individuals” (CD 123). Through the constitution of the superego, civilization “obtains mastery over the individual’s dangerous desire for aggression by weakening and disarming it and by setting up an agency within him to watch over it, like a garrison in a conquered city” (CD 123-124). Although the superego is formed through the internalization of the authority of the parent, which stands in for the authority of the social and is rooted in the parent’s superior power and the child’s radical dependency and fear, the superego’s aggressiveness does not derive from the aggressiveness or cruelty of parental authority. Rather, “the original severity of the superego does not—or does not so much—represent the severity which one has experienced from it [the object], or which one attributes to it; it represents rather one’s own aggressiveness towards it” (CD 129-130). In other words—and here Freud credits Melanie Klein with this insight (see CD 130, note 1)—the severity of the superego is rooted not in the cruelty or severity of parental prohibitions but rather in the severity of the aggression that the *child* feels toward

the *parent* for having prevented him from attaining his first and most important satisfactions.

With the development of the superego comes the sense of guilt, where guilt is rooted not only in the child's fear of doing something bad but also in his fear or wishing for or phantasizing something bad. Indeed, Freud goes so far as to identify "the sense of guilt as the most important problem in the development of civilization and to show that the price we pay for our advance in civilization is a loss of happiness through the heightening of the sense of guilt" (CD 134). This, he says, is the "final conclusion of our investigation" (CD 134). This conclusion leads Freud not only to be critical of the superego and to suggest that the point of psychoanalysis is to work therapeutically to loosen its demands, but also to be critical of the "cultural superego" of ethics (CD 142), which issues excessively severe, unfulfillable ethical demands (such as love your neighbor as you love yourself) (CD 143). The problem with ethics, according to Freud, is that, like the superego, "it, too, does not trouble itself enough about the facts of the mental constitution of human beings. It issues a command and does not ask whether it is possible for people to obey it" (CD 143). One is tempted to say here that the problem that Freud identifies with ethics is that it lacks a realistic conception of the person, that it trades in a dangerous moralistic or rationalistic idealism.¹⁶ Interestingly, if we follow the logic of Freud's argument through, we are led to the conclusion that this dangerous moralistic or rationalistic idealism is itself an expression of the very same aggressive drive whose existence it scrupulously disavows.

It is here, at the end of Freud's text, that the various scattered clues as to Freud's understanding of progress—his implicit philosophy of history—are gathered together into a coherent statement. Freud first notes that he has attempted to be impartial in his analysis of civilization, to be swayed neither by a prejudice in favor of civilization understood as the path to perfection nor by the assumption that civilization creates intolerable forms of constraint and is overall not worth the monumental effort required to hold it in place. "My impartiality," he notes wryly, "is made all the easier to me by my knowing very little about these things. One thing only do I know for certain and that is that man's judgments of value follow directly his wishes for happiness—that, accordingly, they are an attempt to support his illusions with arguments" (CD 144). To those who would find his analysis of civilization disheartening or devoid of solutions, Freud admits that he "can offer them no consolation" (CD 144). All that he can do is to pose what he calls "the fateful question for the human species," namely: "whether and to what

extent their cultural development will succeed in mastering the disturbance of their communal life by the human instinct of aggression and self-destruction” and, we might add, at what cost (CD 144).

What Freud sketches here is a non-teleological, non-progressive reading of history, a reading that remains agnostic on the question of whether all of the achievements of civilization are worth the costs and efforts of the repression and domination necessary to achieve them. Thus Freud is clearly not, at least not in this late text, a straightforward defender of the mainstream or progressive Enlightenment, stalwartly defending the achievements of the Enlightenment as an unquestioned advance for human beings.¹⁷ He isn't even prepared to say that the building of civilization constitutes an advance in the first place, much less is he concerned to defend that advance. As I read him, by taking this position on the prospects for reading history as a story of progress, Freud is simply being consistent, since he skeptically questions the very foundation of morality in the aggressiveness of the superego, seeing them, as Nietzsche would have said, soaked in blood thoroughly and for a long time.¹⁸ In so doing, he calls into question the very possibility of a context-transcendent normative point of view from which something could be identified as a civilizational or moral advance at all. As he says, we have to be “careful not to fall in line with the prejudice that civilization is synonymous with perfecting, that it is the road to perfection pre-ordained for men” (CD 96). We have to be careful, too, of the extent to which our backward looking, historical judgments about what constitutes progress and whether it has been achieved up to now, in the historical process that has led to our own civilization, are simply, as Freud might have said, an attempt to support our harmonistic illusions with arguments.

Still, does this mean that the late Freud is mired in cultural pessimism and resignation? Does he conclude that civilization is not worth the effort and that we'd be better off without it? Has he abandoned all hope for ameliorating or mitigating or at least coping with the effects of the death drive? Clearly not. He reiterates several times that even if so-called ‘primitive’ man was in some sense happier without all of the constraints of civilization, his enjoyment of his pleasures was much less secure and long-lasting. And he suggests that, his critique of civilization notwithstanding, “we may expect gradually to carry through such alteration in our civilization as will better satisfy our needs and will escape our criticisms” even as we must acknowledge that there may be “difficulties attached to the nature of civilization which will not yield to any attempt at reform” (CD 115).

So, what then is Freud's stance toward progress? I would like to suggest that Freud is best understood as a thinker of the radical enlightenment, as a skeptical enlightenment thinker whose tragic, unreconciled vision of the conflicts between civilizational progress and the death drive is offered in the service of unsettling our harmonistic illusions by problematizing our own tendency toward complacent and self-congratulatory conceptions of progress. However, contra Fromm's reading of him, referenced above, Freud's late vision is not tragic in the sense that he thinks that moral or political progress is in principle impossible. Rather, it is tragic in a more subtle and complicated sense: it is tragic precisely because of its unreconciled reading of history, that is, its refusal to take sides with either the cheerleaders or the enemies of civilization, with either the defenders or the critics of Enlightenment. Freud's profession of impartiality on the question of whether civilization is the best thing that ever happened to us or not worth all the effort suggests precisely this: *any* attempt to read history as having a clear normative direction, whether that direction is construed progressively or regressively, constitutes an attempt to support one's illusions—be they optimistic or pessimistic illusions—with arguments. As Adorno put it: “the greatness of Freud as that of all radical bourgeois thinkers consists in that he leaves such contradictions unresolved, and he scorns the pretended systematic harmony where things in themselves are torn asunder.”¹⁹ In so doing, Adorno continues, Freud reveals “the antagonistic character of social reality,” reflecting “something of its objective unreason.”²⁰ In other words, Freud might productively be read as attempting to problematize or shed critical light on our historical present, precisely by refusing either to celebrate or to condemn the historical path that led up to it.

CONCLUSION

A similar tragic sensibility is reflected in Melanie Klein's comments on progress, in a passage that I quoted part of earlier:

The repeated attempts that have been made to improve humanity—and in particular to make it more peaceable—have failed, because nobody has understood the full depth and vigour of the instincts of aggression innate in each individual. Such efforts do not seek to do more than encourage the positive, well-wishing impulses of the person while denying or suppressing his aggressive ones. And so they have been doomed to failure from the beginning. But psycho-analysis has different means at its disposal for a task of this kind. It cannot, it is true, altogether do away with man's ag-

gressive instinct as such; but it can, by diminishing the anxiety which accentuates those instincts, break up the mutual reinforcement that is going on all the time between his hatred and his fear.²¹

Freud's tragic vision is primarily concerned with what I have elsewhere called progress as a 'fact', that is, with backward looking judgments about whether or not history can or should be understood as a progressive of enlightenment, learning, or development. Klein, by contrast, expands on Freud's view by turning her attention to what I have called progress as an imperative, that is, to progress understood as a forward looking or future oriented goal or aspiration that we are striving to achieve, such as the achievement of a more just or a less oppressive society.²² Klein's suggestion is that heretofore efforts to promote progress as a forward looking moral or political imperative tend to be predicated upon a kind of wishful thinking, a denial of the aggressive or death drive, and that this wishful thinking dooms them to failure. Psychoanalysis, on Klein's view, can help to cure us of this wishful thinking by offering a more realistic conception of the person.²³

Klein's conception of the person centers on her distinction between two fundamental positions: the paranoid-schizoid position, in which the death drive is ascendant, the primary object is split into the idealized good and demonized bad breast, and the individual experiences itself as disintegrated, 'in bits'; and the depressive position, in which the erotic drive holds sway, and the fundamental ambivalence of the object—its good and bad, loving and destructive, features—and of the self is tolerated but neither overcome nor reconciled.²⁴ Although Klein views the depressive position as more psychologically mature than the paranoid-schizoid position, she also tends to eschew the kinds of progressive, developmental trajectories that Freud favored. Instead, she speaks of the depressive position as having "come to the fore," suggesting an oscillating or figure-ground rather than a developmental stage model of the self.²⁵

For Klein, then, the ambivalence of the drives is psychically fundamental precisely because the death drive is ineliminable. However, this does not mean that she denies the possibility of progress in a forward looking sense. Rather, by claiming that psychoanalysis can "break up the mutual reinforcement that is going on all the time between...hatred and fear," Klein suggests that we can find better ways of managing the aggressive drives and the damage done by them, even if we must, on her view, acknowledge that they cannot be eliminated entirely. On this account,

progress could be understood as the amelioration of the tendencies toward splitting—the mirror image processes of demonization and idealization that are the hallmarks of the paranoid-schizoid position—and toward projection and introjection—the projection of one’s own aggression toward others onto those others, which is then, in turn, introjected back into the self—that are crucial to the dynamics of domination. The key, at both the individual and social levels, lies in developing the ability to tolerate the ambivalence of the drives without resorting to such defense mechanisms. Although more would need to be said in order to show how this might work at the social level, this Kleinian picture at least suggests the possibility of a limited, realistic, and negativistic but nonetheless forward-looking conception of progress. This account is limited and realistic insofar as it is based on Klein’s realistic conception of the person, according to which the death drive is ineliminable; it is negativistic insofar as progress, on this view, amounts to ameliorating or mitigating the psychic and social tendencies that are crucial to the dynamics of domination. Moreover, since Klein maintains that the oscillation between these two positions is a persistent feature of even psychologically mature individuals, she also places great emphasis on the willingness to repair the damage and destructiveness that we inevitably do. This, too, is a component of her conception of progress.

In closing, I want to suggest that progress in Klein’s sense is quite close to Adorno’s negativistic conception of progress as the avoidance of catastrophe, where catastrophe, for Klein, could be understood as the result of the unfettered expression of the dynamics of splitting, projection and introjection characteristic of the paranoid-schizoid position. Her account of the depressive position as the toleration without reconciliation of the fundamental and irreconcilable ambivalence of the self and its relation to its objects could also be productively compared to Adorno’s conception of negative dialectics, understood as a kind of non-repressive togetherness of difference. Such a conception provides an interesting alternative to the radical and positive utopian vision forwarded by Marcuse²⁶—indeed, Adorno famously maintained that the very idea of genuine reconciliation prevents it being posited as a positive concept—although, if we accept the idea that the drives are themselves historically shaped and transformed, then we cannot rule out in advance the possibility of more fundamental transformations in the structure of the drives.

Still, if we read Freud and Klein through an Adornian lens, we can take from their work the idea that *in the current historical context* the harmonistic illusions of

the defenders of progress (understood as a backward looking claim about history) are actually an impediment to progress (understood as a forward looking moral-political imperative) precisely because they blind us to depth of the challenges that we face. As such, they serve the interests of the status quo. As Adorno put it, “that one is to speak from the bright and not from the dark side of individual and society, suits exactly the official and acceptable and respectable ideology.”²⁷ In this way, Freud and Klein, like Nietzsche and Sade, could be placed among the dark writers of the bourgeoisie who make progress *possible* precisely through their “unsparing criticism” (CD 115) of its alleged instances. Here we have a different way of understanding what Marcuse once called the explosive content of psychoanalysis,²⁸ distinct from his understanding of the revolutionary, utopian potential of uninhibited eros. The explosive content, on this reading, consists in the ability to break through respectable ideology, to fracture existing social reality, and in so doing to make room for its radical critique. In this sense, perhaps, as Adorno said, “Freud’s misanthropy is nothing else than hopeless love and the only expression of hope which still remains.”²⁹

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NOTES

1. Thanks to Benjamin Randolph, Nicole Yokum, and audiences at the Australasian Society for Continental Philosophy and the University of Essex Philosophy Department for helpful comments on earlier versions of this paper. Thanks also to Nicole Yokum for valuable research assistance.
2. Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, volume XVIII (1920–1922). Trans. James Strachey. London: Vintage, 2001.
3. Melanie Klein, “The Early Development of Conscience in the Child,” in *Love, Guilt and Reparation and Other Works 1921–1945: The Writings of Melanie Klein, Volume I*. New York: The Free Press, 1975, 257.
4. Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, in *The Standard Edition*, volume XXI (1927–1931), 113. Henceforth cited parenthetically in the text as CD.
5. Erich Fromm, “Freud’s Model of Man and its Social Determinants,” in *The Crisis of Psychoanalysis: Essays on Freud, Marx, and Social Psychology*. Boston: Holt, Rinehart, Winston, 1970, 45.
6. On this point, see Martin Jay, *The Dialectical Imagination: A History of the Frankfurt School and the Institute of Social Research, 1923–1950*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1963, 100.
7. Karen Horney, *New Ways in Psychoanalysis*. New York: W.W. Norton, 1939, 132. Quoted in Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1966, 272. Although Horkheimer initially shared Fromm’s distaste for the death drive precisely because of the worry that it implied a kind of political resignation, he changed his mind on this after World War II, at which point he came to think that the death drive captured well the depth and ferocity of the destructive urges of modern human beings. In the post-war context, the death drive and the antinomies of Freudian thought to which it gives rise emerged, in Martin Jay’s words, “as a necessary bulwark against the harmonistic illusions of the revisionists [such as Fromm and Horney]” (Jay, *The Dialectical Imagination*, 105).
8. For the purposes of this paper, I’m primarily interested in the death drive in a Kleinian sense, where this refers to primary aggressiveness or destructiveness, rather than in the sense of the speculative biological Nirvana principle, the drive to return to inorganic nature, that Freud hypothesized as the root cause of aggressiveness. This is partly because I find Klein’s conception of the death drive and of the fundamental ambivalence of the drives more convincing and well-worked out than Freud’s—though I won’t be arguing that point here—and partly because I think that it is aggression and destructiveness that are viewed by critical theorists as the real stumbling blocks for the idea of progress. Indeed, I suspect, though I won’t argue for this interpretive claim here, that the tragic vision implied by the death drive is a significant factor shaping the relationship between psychoanalysis and contemporary Frankfurt School critical theory. If the death drive is presumed to be incompatible with the possibility of historical progress, and if, as I have argued elsewhere, the idea of historical progress plays a crucial role in grounding normativity for both Jürgen Habermas and Axel Honneth, then the death drive must be rejected. For the argument that the idea of historical progress plays a crucial role in grounding the normativity of critical theory in Habermas and Honneth, see Allen, *The End of Progress: Decolonizing the Normative Foundations of Critical Theory*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2016. For a compelling defense of the relevance of the Freudian conception of the death drive for critical theory, see Benjamin Fong, *Death and Mastery: Psychoanalytic Drive Theory and the Subject of Late Capitalism*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2016.
9. Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization*, 11. Henceforth cited parenthetically in the text as EC. As Inara

- Luisa Marin puts it: Marcuse “never renounced the aporias of psychoanalysis.” Marin, “The Bi-Dimensionality of Marcuse’s Critical Psychoanalytical Model of Emancipation: Between Negativity and Normativity,” *Radical Philosophy Review* 19: 1 (2016): 229-240, at 240.
10. Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*. Trans. Edmund Jephcott. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002, 26.
 11. Herbert Marcuse, *Five Lectures: Psychoanalysis, Politics, and Utopia*, trans. Jeremy Shapiro and Shierry M. Weber. Boston: Beacon Press, 1970, 11.
 12. Marin, “The Bi-Dimensionality of Marcuse’s Critical Psychoanalytical Model of Emancipation,” 233-237.
 13. For a defense of Marcuse’s ambivalent reading of psychoanalysis, particularly in relation to Adorno and Horkheimer’s more pessimistic interpretation and Habermas and Honneth’s more optimistic reading, see Marin, “The Bi-Dimensionality of Marcuse’s Critical Psychoanalytical Model of Emancipation.”
 14. Eva von Redecker, “Marx’s Concept of Radical Needs in the Guise of Queer Desire,” in *Global Justice and Desire: Queering Economy*. Eds. Nikita Dhawan et al. London: Routledge, 2015, 33. Though von Redecker also notes that there are more similarities between Marcuse’s and Foucault’s analyses than are typically assumed.
 15. Whitebook, “The Marriage of Marx and Freud,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Critical Theory*. Ed. Fred Rush. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004, 88. Quoting Freud, *The Future of an Illusion*, in *The Standard Edition*, volume XXI, 16.
 16. For the argument that psychoanalysis is important for critical theory precisely because it offers a realistic conception of the person that can counter the temptations of moral idealism, see Axel Honneth, “The Work of Negativity: A Recognition-Theoretical Revision of Psychoanalysis,” in *The I in We: Studies in the Theory of Recognition*. Trans. Joseph Ganahl. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2012.
 17. For a contrary, pro-Enlightenment, reading of Freud, see Eli Zaretsky, *Political Freud: A History*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2015, chapter 3.
 18. As Nietzsche puts it, “...the moral conceptual world of “guilt,” “conscience,” “duty,” “sacredness of duty” had its origin: its beginnings were, like the beginnings of everything of great on earth, soaked in blood thoroughly and for a long time.” Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals* in *On the Genealogy of Morals and Ecce Homo*. New York: Vintage, 1989, 65.
 19. Adorno, “Revisionist Psychoanalysis,” trans. Nan-Nan Lee. *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 40: 3 (2014): 326-338, 337.
 20. *Ibid.*
 21. Klein, “The Early Development of Conscience in the Child,” in *Love, Guilt and Reparation*, 257.
 22. For further discussion of these two dimensions of progress, see Allen, *The End of Progress*.
 23. Indeed, Joel Whitebook goes so far as to claim that psychoanalysis considers utopianism to be “undesirable in principle” because it is an expression of infantile omnipotence, a disavowal of “the incomplete and conflictual nature of human existence” that “raises the specter of totalitarianism” (Whitebook, “The Marriage of Marx and Freud,” 89). I have argued at greater length for the virtues of Klein’s realistic conception of the person, particularly with respect to critical theory, in Allen, “Are We Driven? Critical Theory and Psychoanalysis Reconsidered,” *Critical Horizons* 16: 4 (November 2015): 311-328.
 24. Klein, “Notes on Some Schizoid Mechanisms,” in *Envy and Gratitude and Other Works, 1946-1963: The Writings of Melanie Klein, Volume III*. New York: The Free Press, 1975.
 25. *Ibid.*, 14.
 26. Inara Marin argues that Marcuse’s conception of emancipation, derived from his reading of

psychoanalysis, is a negative one, inasmuch as “his critical model intends to depart from social pathologies and find in their negation paths for emancipation” (Marin, “The Bi-Dimensionality of Marcuse’s Critical Psychoanalytical Model of Emancipation,” 240, note 20). However, even if we grant Marin this point, insofar as Marcuse does give positive content to the conception of libidinal utopia that he derives negatively, his account of emancipation is not negativistic in the Adornian sense.

27. Adorno, “Revisionist Psychoanalysis,” 335.

28. “Theory and Politics: A Discussion with Herbert Marcuse, Jürgen Habermas, Heinz Lubasc, and Telman Spengler,” *Telos*, 38 (1978-1979): 127.

29. Adorno, “Revisionist Psychoanalysis,” 336.