

THE DANGEROUS LIAISONS BETWEEN PRAGMATISM AND PSYCHOANALYSIS: SEX, DRIVES, AND IMPULSES

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ABSTRACT: This paper is a contribution to the discussion on the relationship between pragmatism and psychoanalysis. Specifically, I will contribute to the discussion by focusing on the concept of sex. Classical pragmatists – e.g., Dewey and Mead – criticize Freudian psychoanalysis for its exaggerated focus on sex. Yet, their criticisms lack a thorough discussion of what sex exactly means, according to Freud. In this paper, I would like to focus on Freud’s idea of *sex as a drive* in order to shed light on some important and hitherto partially neglected convergences and divergences between pragmatism and psychoanalysis.

Keywords: pragmatism; Sigmund Freud; sex; drives; impulses.

Introduction

The relationship between pragmatism and psychoanalysis has been the subject of growing attention in the last years and decades. As early as the 90’s, Vincent Colapietro’s seminal work highlighted both the presence of an idea of the unconscious in Peirce and the possibility of using Peircean semiotics to illuminate and analyze the “unconscious habits” of neurotic patients (Colapietro, 1995). The relationship between James and Freud, on the other hand, is both direct – as the two met in person at the Clark Lectures in 1909 – and problematic – as James refused to adopt the terminology of the unconscious (Colapietro, 2021), and intuitively considered himself much closer to the perspective of Carl Gustav Jung (Dadaian, 2023). Even more complex is the relationship between Dewey and Freudian psychoanalysis. While Dewey welcomed Freud’s anti-intellectualist innovations, there is no lack of critical distancing. Dewey’s criticisms, which concern, among other things, Freud’s failure to recognize the social dimension of the unconscious (Dewey 1922), have brought some authors to point out that Dewey re-

fers not to a Freudian unconscious dimension, but rather to a pre-reflective dimension (Santarelli, 2020), and that he foreshadows an aesthetic conception that is an alternative to that of Freud (Henning 2022). Finally, recent contributions have focused on the similarities and the differences between George Herbert Mead’s social psychology and Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis (Côté 2015; 2023; Santarelli, 2013).

Apparently, the role of sex is a major point of disagreement between pragmatism and Freudian psychoanalysis. It is uncontroversial that classical pragmatists criticized the excessive role played by sex in psychoanalytical explanation. This criticism is part of a more general skepticism towards the reductivist tendencies of Freud’s system. The monothematic emphasis of sexual dynamics in psychoanalysis risks overshadowing the social nature of instincts and impulses, the varieties of affective human experiences, the interplay between impulses, intelligence, and habits as a major source of individual and social progress. In contrast, pragmatists do not seem to take much interest in sex – neither as a decisive instinct or impulse in the human psychic economy, nor as a practice to be improved and refined (Shusterman, 2021). To put it bluntly, sex is the exact point where the paths of psychoanalysis and pragmatism seem to part.

In this paper, I will neither try to reconstruct the relationship between these two streams of thought in general terms, nor I will discuss the pragmatist approach to sex. Rather, I would like to contribute to the ongoing discussion on pragmatism and psychoanalysis by focusing on a very specific issue: Freud’s specific understanding and use of the concept of sex – i.e., *sex as a drive*. The reasons of this focus are twofold. First, classical pragmatists did not include in their criticisms of Freud a thorough account and discussion of the idea of drive. They blamed Freudian psychoanalysis for its reductive focus on sex, but without a fair account of what sex really means in Freudian psychoanalysis. Second, this specific topic is also rarely explored in the growing and increas-

ingly significant secondary literature on pragmatism and psychoanalysis. Focusing on some infrequent and yet notable exceptions (Rieff, 1959; Henning, 2022, 2023; Coté, 2023), I will focus on the topic of sex as a drive to shed light on some important divergencies and convergences between the two approaches.

The Pragmatists vs. Freud

Pragmatists resisted rather straightforwardly the wave of enthusiasm toward psychoanalysis that affected the American intellectual world in the early twentieth century (Zaretsky, 2015). One of the reasons of this resistance can be explicitly found in the several pragmatist condemnations of Freud's excessive interest in sex as a major factor in human psychological lives. James' scattered comments on Freudian psychoanalysis display a certain amount of ambivalence. In his masterpiece *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, James writes:

In the wonderful explorations of Binet, Janet, Breuer, Freud, Mason, Prince, and others, of the subliminal consciousness of patients with hysteria, we have revealed to us whole systems of underground life, in the shape of memories of a painful sort which lead a parasitic existence, buried outside of the primary fields of consciousness, and making irruptions thereinto with hallucinations, pains, convulsions, paralyses of feeling and of motion, and the whole procession of symptoms of hysteric disease of body and of mind. Alter or abolish by suggestion these subconscious memories, and the patient immediately gets well. (James, 1902: 217).

James is, however, unconvinced by the general framework of Freud's theory: he is concerned about Freud's fixations, his conceptions of symbolism, his debunking attitude toward religion. And in general terms, James refuses to adopt the very concept of unconscious (Weinberger 2000; Colapietro 2021). In a letter to Théodore Flournoy, James expresses the hope that "Freud and his

pupils will push their ideas to their utmost limits, so that we may learn what they are. They can't fail to throw light on human nature". Yet, he confesses that Freud gave him the impression of a man "obsessed with fixed ideas" (in Perry: 1935, II, 122-23).

Mead's and Dewey's works generally acknowledge Freud's contribution as shedding light on the pre-reflective dimension of the psyche, and on the role that internalized norms play in our moral and social lives. But when it comes to sex, their comments on psychoanalysis are scattered, but definitely direct. Mead ironically refers to the "more or less fantastic psychology of the Freudian group", and to its tendency to focus on sex and violent self-assertion, while from Mead's perspective, the normal situation is "one which involves a reaction of the individual in a situation which is socially determined, but to which he brings his own responses as an "I." (Mead, 2016: 210-1). When critically discussing those theories which try to single out discrete and separated instincts, Dewey seems to have psychoanalysis in mind as he mentions the current simplification according to which: "All instincts go back to the sexual, so that *cherchez la femme* (under multitudinous symbolic disguises) is the last word of science with respect to the analysis of conduct" (Dewey, 1922: 133).

Dewey becomes far more explicit as he discusses the "treatment of sex by psychoanalysts". This treatment – Dewey argues – is fallacious, as it generalizes the ways sex is conceived of and experienced in a specific cultural and historical context as if they were "the necessary effects of fixed native impulses of human nature" (Dewey, 1922: 106). A few pages below, Dewey goes as far as to propose a Deweyan redefinition of the complex – a key psychoanalytic concept – as a "surreptitious furtive organization which does not articulate in avowed expression" (Dewey, 1922: 113-114). In doing so, he criticizes the one-sidedness of the clinical psychology of his time – allegedly, psychoanalysis – for overworking "the influence of sexual impulse in this connection" (Dewey, 1922: 114). And finally, Dewey maintains that psychoanalysts "get

their truths mixed up in theory with the false psychology of original individual consciousness” (Dewey, 1922: 62). This prevents them from providing a convincing account of the social nature of human mind.

To sum up: from the perspective of Dewey’s social psychology, the psychoanalytical treatment of sex is subject to three criticisms: 1) it expresses a form of naive universalism, as it generalizes phenomena belonging to specific cultural contexts¹; 2) it overemphasizes the role of sexual impulses in the etiology of complexes; 3) it is part of an overly individualistic framework.

Are these criticisms accurate and legitimate? Is Freud really exaggerating the role of sex in our individual and collective lives? Or are these reprimands a sign of the pragmatists’ prejudicial and prudish attitude towards sex?

Richard Shusterman (2021) has held this latter position. Shusterman criticizes pragmatists for failing to take a serious account of sex and sexual practices, despite the fact that their embodied and experience-and-practice-centered approach should involve a keen interest in such matters. When it comes to James, Peirce, Dewey, and Mead, this lack of interest is traced back to a mixture of Puritanism and gender privilege – as white heterosexual men, these authors did not feel the urge to reflect on sexual issues. As an example of this prudish attitude and theoretical bashfulness, Shusterman mentions Dewey’s “animus to Freud’s ideas”, as it is expressed in some among the aforementioned quotes from *Human Nature and Conduct*. The unfortunate theoretical outcome of this “animus” to sexual issue is Dewey’s failure to see “the genuine possibility of aesthetic qualities and ideal meanings in lovemaking” (Shusterman, 2021: 17). Dewey is right when he claims that the inhibition of sexual impulse from immediate discharge might open space

for imagination, reflection and the emergence of meaning and aesthetic values. Yet, according to Shusterman, Dewey did not have the courage to perform one final step. He did not realize that inhibition might lead to the emergence of the aesthetic value *within* sexual practices, believing instead that such an emergence occurs when sexual impulses are sublimated into goals that are practically irrelevant “to the physiological end of sexual intercourse” (Shusterman, 2021: 16).

A thorough and general discussion of Shusterman’s challenging criticism of classical pragmatists falls beyond the scope of this paper². This is why I intend to focus my attention on a very specific aspect of Shusterman’s reconstruction, i.e., Dewey’s “animus” to Freud. I would like to stress a minor point and a major point. The minor point is that “animus” is probably too strong a word. If we concede that Dewey surely does not buy the whole psychoanalytical system, he nonetheless welcomes different aspects of Freud’s revolution. As Sidney Hook wrote: “John Dewey once remarked that although he was critical of dualistic elements in Freud’s psychology, especially of his concept of a substantial unconscious, he was deeply impressed by Freud’s extraordinary powers of observation of human behavior” (Hook, 1990: 212). As a sign of this attitude which appears neither enthusiastic, nor entirely hostile, one could mention Dewey’s proximity to Alfred Meyer, an important psychologist and psychiatrist who creatively and critically embraced several aspects of Freud’s thought (see Colapietro, 2023). The major point is that Dewey’s anti-reductivist and culturalist criticism of psychoanalysis does not directly address the psychoanalytical understanding of sex. And, curiously enough, in a brief but quarrelsome reference to the notion of libido, Dewey (1922: 154) mentions Jung – i.e., the author who broke with Freud precisely because (among other

¹ This resonates with several criticisms leveled against Freud from cultural anthropologists of the time. This resonance is probably not a matter of chance, given Dewey’s intellectual proximity with prominent anthropologists such as Boas and Malinowski (Goldman, 2012). See for instance Malinowski’s challenge to Freud’s hypothesis of the universality of the Oedipus complex.

² For a detailed and inspiring criticism of Shusterman, see Henning (2023). I personally agree with Henning on various points – e.g., Shusterman’s failure to grasp the sexy nature of Dewey’s idea of consummation and his prejudicial and poor interpretation of Jane Addams’ approach to sex.

reasons) he rejected the Freudian identification of libido with sexual energy.

This brings us to the next question. Apart from the pragmatists' allegedly cold relationship with sex, is the Freudian idea of sexual drives compatible at all with pragmatism – and especially, with Dewey's and Mead's social psychology and philosophy?

Tell me the truth about sex. From quantitative disagreement to qualitative disagreement

It is generally agreed that, from a pragmatist standpoint, Freud's perspective is *reductive*. Pragmatists contributed to a rich and multifaceted understanding of Eros as a leading force in our personal, intellectual, and aesthetic lives (Alexander, 2013; Henning, 2022). From this perspective, Eros is not just a sublimation of sex in Freud's sense – i.e., a redirection of sexual libido towards a non-sexual and socially approved and valued aim. Dewey himself in fact, uses the term sublimation, but in a very different sense. As Robert Westbrook points out (1991: 291), when Dewey speaks of the sublimation of impulses, he has in mind a process of reconstruction through which the impulse becomes a factor intelligently coordinated with others engaged in a continuous course of action. To “sublimate” an impetus of anger, we must include it within a lasting practical disposition that drives us to denounce and fight social injustice. More generally speaking, an impulse is sublimated when it becomes “a factor coordinated intelligently with others in a continuous course of action” (Dewey, 1922: 108). On a theoretical level, this appears to be a much more ambitious conception than Freud's original idea, according to which to sublimate a drive means directing the drive toward a goal that is different from sexual satisfaction³.

³ We should not underestimate the political stakes of this disagreement. Recently, Barbara Stiegler highlighted how the influence of a certain interpretation of Freud was also present in the great theoretical opponent of Dewey, Walter Lippmann. Especially in *A Preface to Politics* of 1913, Lippmann starts from the idea of the centrality of drives in our social and political life. The drives are neither to be repressed nor indulged, but rather

Yet, this charge of reductivism can be further articulated in two different directions. One could argue that pragmatism's criticism of the psychoanalytical approach to sex is basically *quantitative*: Freud is wrong because he reduces the complexity of eros to sex, and – generally speaking – he overemphasizes the role played by sex in normal and pathological psychological processes. This appears to suggest that Freud gets it *locally right* when he talks about sex. The problem is that he overstretches the domain of validity of his discoveries.

But a *second direction* can be followed as well, one which suggests that pragmatists should not merely be wary about the extent of the validity of Freud's conception of sexuality. More radically, they should reject Freud's conceptualization of sex in itself. In the remainder of the article, I will explore this hypothesis. To do so, it is necessary to do what the classical pragmatists have neglected to do, namely, to examine the Freudian conception of sex.

Freud's ideas about sex develop in a complex and sophisticated way throughout his intellectual development. For the present discussion, we can limit our focus to two aspects. The first is the tight connection between *sex* and *drives*. It is true and undebatable that, according to Freud, sexual drives play an extremely important role both in pathological processes – i.e., the genesis of neuroses – and in non-pathological aspects of our lives – i.e., art. What is less clear is the meaning of the word *drive*. Strachey's decision to translate the original German term *Trieb* with *instinct* rather than with *drive* in the *Standard Edition* is not helpful. In fact, it is evident that Freud understands sexual *Triebe* as something very different from instincts⁴. Insofar as drives are understood as propulsive

er sublimated (in Freud's sense), that is, directed toward a goal that is more civilized and less brutal. The task of the politician is therefore to find good substitutes for our bad desires (Stiegler, 2019: 31). The political and democratic import of Dewey's redefinition of sublimation is not unrelated to Dewey's overall criticism of Lippmann's “technocratic” approach.

⁴ The background of this issue, and the reasons why in the *Revised Standard Edition* of Freud's work *Trieb* is translated with “drive” rather than with “instinct” – as Strachey does in the

forces that remain relatively indeterminate, both with regards to their objects and to the behavior through which they are expressed, they cannot be assimilated to instincts – neither in the classical definition of the term nor in the more recent idea of behavior and innate trigger-mechanisms (Laplanche & Pontalis, 1988: 214). Sexual drives are more plastic and more indeterminate than instincts, and this very plasticity is the main reason why we can track their vicissitudes (Freud, 1915).

The second aspect is to be found in Freud's mature production, especially following the important changes, which occurred in psychoanalysis at the turn of the 20th century. The most relevant among these changes for the present discussion is Freud's move from an early dualism – opposing sexual drives to ego-survival-drives – to a second dualism – opposing sexual drives to life drives⁵. In the context of this second dualism – announced in his 1920 essay "Beyond the Pleasure Principle" – sexual drives become part of the wider set of *life drives*. In opposition to the disruptive and disintegrating force of death drives, life drives aim at conserving existing units of life, and at generating and preserving new and more complex units (Freud, 1938: 149). And in turn, life drives are generally described in terms of Eros, i.e., something whose goal is "complicating life" and at the same time, "preserving it" (Freud, 1923: 40). Therefore, sexual drives are part of a wider aspect of psychological life that aims at creating bigger organizations of life by uniting existing unities. In this sense, rather than reducing psychical life to sex, Freud seems to radically expand the common meaning of sex (Lear, 2015).

There are some surprising points of contact between Freud's mature theory of sexual drives and the pragmatist philosophy and social psychology. First, sexual drives refer to an impulsive dimension of life that is situated at the boundaries between the somatic and the psycholog-

ical dimensions (Freud 1915), and which cannot be reduced to instincts. This idea resonates significantly with Mead's (2016) terminological move from the vocabulary of instincts to the vocabulary of impulses and with Dewey's (1922) focus on the interplay between impulses and habits⁶. Similarly to what happens with Freud's drives, the concept of instincts is not well equipped to account for the relative fluidity, dynamism and motility of human impulsive life.

Second, in Freud's mature works, Eros plays an integrative role that some pragmatist scholars attributed to...*eros*! According to Thomas Alexander, Eros can be defined as the drive towards an integrated and full experience of meaning (Alexander, 2013: 5). As Bethany Henning argues, this idea of Eros can and should include a more familiar understanding of the word – e.g., sexual relationships. From this perspective, sexual fulfillment "is not merely a matter of securing pleasure for oneself, it also realizes our ability to temporarily transcend or expand beyond the boundaries that seemed to separate the self from another" (Henning, 2022: 101). Of course, this pragmatist understanding of eros includes a qualitative aspect that is not at the center of Freud's interest. This can be seen by observing how much richer Dewey's idea of consummation is (Henning 2022: 102) in comparison with the mere fulfillment of drives. Moreover, this erotic process of integration is fulfilled in very different ways in the two perspectives – see the aforementioned different ideas of sublimation which can be found in Dewey and in Freud⁷. Yet, when it comes to the integrative role of Eros, pragmatism and Freudian psychoanalysis seem to be somehow on the same page.

Standard Edition – are painstakingly reconstructed in Solms (2018: 31-35).

⁵ It is precisely because of this dualism that Dewey's criticism already mentioned, that in psychoanalysis "all instincts go back to the sexual" (Dewey, 1922: 133), is misleading.

⁶ On this topic, see Dreon's (2022) painstaking analysis.

⁷ One could argue that Freud's dualism about drives is incompatible with the pragmatist refusal of the existence of separate instincts, and more generally speaking, with the pragmatist anti-dichotomic attitude. Yet, I think the disagreement on this point can be mitigated through two caveats. First, drives are not instincts. Second, Freud is keenly aware that life drives and death drives hardly ever exist in their pure form: "every instinctual impulse that we can examine consists of similar fusions or alloys of the two classes of instinct" (Freud, 1933: 104).

Nonetheless, the idea of drive is also a matrix of extremely relevant differences between pragmatism and psychoanalysis. The first difference has to do with Freud's idea of the *death drive*. Pragmatists and Freud agree that our mature selves are constituted by habits belonging to different layers of time. Habits do not naturally fade as soon as the environmental conditions from which they emerge have disappeared. Rather, they are provided with a kind of inertial force. This inertia of habits is a source of major conflict. John Dewey (1931: 160-161) and Jane Addams (1902) see this inertia as a major source of political and moral impasses. In Freud's perspective, adult neurotics often suffer from the persistence of defense mechanisms that were useful in childhood but counterproductive to functional adult life. And yet, the repetition of well-ingrained habits in the context of therapy – i.e., the phenomenon of transference – is both a resistance to the progress of therapy and an opportunity to stir the iron when it is hot. In stark contrast with hyper-rationalist readings of psychoanalysis, Freud seems to suggest that interpretations become effective only when pathological habits are concretely enacted in the framework of the therapeutic relation⁸.

The idea of inertial habits is a productive way to make sense of this repetitive unconscious aspect of human psychical life⁹, but this agreement ceases at the precise moment when Freud traces the genesis of these repetitions back to a specific kind of drive opposed to life “instincts,” e.g., death drive (Freud 1920). Here, repetition is connected to a far deeper motive than the mere inertial tendency of habits – i.e., the maladaptive persistence of early defenses, the mechanism through which control becomes an absorptive end in themselves, rather than a means. According to Freud's mature work, repetitions, violence and aggression are then not the consequence of unhealthy interactions between old habits and new situ-

ations. Rather, they result when an internal, deadly drive is re-directed towards the external world and others. A far cry from the view held by pragmatist psychology and philosophy.

But things become even more complicated as Freud suggests tentatively¹⁰ that this conservative feature is characteristic of drives *generally speaking* – i.e., including life drives and therefore Eros. According to Côté (2023, 7) the distance between drives and the pragmatist idea of impulses seems to be unbridgeable, “since the former involves a fundamental determination (to be found in libido, or in life and death drives), whereas the latter only involves spontaneous or mediated responses to specific stimuli”. Moreover, while pragmatists emphasize how impulses might eventually lead to a regression with respect to a specific social order, they potentially open the path to a new emerging social organization (Mead 2016). Drives, on the other hand, somehow always include a tendency to regression. The idea that regression is not the outcome of a specific configuration of the conflict between habits and impulses in a given context, but somehow structurally belongs to human impulsive life as such, definitely cannot be included in the pragmatist conception of the human being. As Philip Rieff pointed out, “Dewey sees the impulses as capable of rescuing a society in which habits in institutional structures (i.e., collective habits) have become petrified and therefore impediments to progress. Quite on the contrary, Freud sees drives as “themselves the force which limits progress by threatening a renewal of conflict (Rieff, 1959: 32). The ambivalent nature of drives is an ineradicable source of disintegration of character and social action.

⁸ For a pragmatist reading of transference, see Brigati (2015).

⁹ See the discussion between Colapietro (2000) and De Lauretis (2000).

¹⁰ In Lecture XXXII of the new series of introductory lectures to psychoanalysis, Freud writes: “The question, too, of whether the conservative character may not belong to all instincts without exception, whether the erotic instincts as well may not be seeking to bring back an earlier state of things when they strive to bring about a synthesis of living things into greater unities - this question, too, we must leave unanswered” (Freud, 1933: 107).

Conclusions

The considerations brought forward in the final part of the article seem to suggest a clear incompatibility in the way Freud and the pragmatists understand the human mind. The focus on the Freudian concept of drive – a focus that pragmatists have tended to neglect – ultimately seems to reinforce the idea of an unbridgeable distance between the two perspectives. These theoretical observations seem to be strengthened by some succinct historical considerations. It is interesting how heterodox or alternative tendencies to psychoanalysis have often found theoretical resources in pragmatism. Harry Stack Sullivan – i.e., the founder of interpersonal psychology, significantly influenced by pragmatism – has always been considered an outsider in the psychoanalytic movement (Mitchell and Black 1995). Alfred Adler and Carl Gustav Jung – initially heirs apparent to Freud before their “betrayal” – were significantly influenced by pragmatism (Winetroun 1968; Dadaian 2023)¹¹.

Does this mean that the relationship between pragmatism and psychoanalysis should only be thought of in terms of *radical incompatibility*? While the differences between both approaches cannot be denied, I do not believe that they are fundamentally irreconcilable. For example, it is possible to take resources from each perspective to correct the limitations of the other mutually. If pragmatism allows us to grasp the aesthetic, participatory, and qualitative dimensions of sexual life, psychoanalysis teaches us that the danger of regression is a constant threat in our private lives as well as in collective phenomena. Pragmatist categories can also help us to creatively highlight and reinterpret some crucial aspects of psychoanalytic theory and practice – e.g., defense mechanisms, transference, and anxiety. Generally speaking, it is reasonable to argue that the comparison

between pragmatism and psychoanalysis becomes all the more productive the more one conceives of Freudian psychoanalysis as a practice and puts Freud’s theoretical speculations in the background.¹²

Yet, paradoxically, even the categories seemingly most alien to pragmatism can be creatively put at the service of a pragmatist social philosophy. Think of the idea of regression. A keen interpreter of Freud like Herbert Marcuse (1955) highlighted how the regressive aspect of our fantasies can be a source of criticism of social conformism and of the more repressive forms assumed by the reality principle. Moreover, the inertia of habits is not simply a source of conservatism, but also a legitimate resistance against the pressing contemporary imperative to immediately adapt ourselves to reality (Stiegler, 2019), rather than readjust (Dewey 1934) ourselves, our social relationships and social reality according to our interests, values, and desires¹³. In a nutshell, the convergencies and divergencies reconstructed in this article could also be taken as an invitation to pragmatists and psychoanalysts to contribute to a social philosophy that “joins regression and progression” (Côté, 2023: 14) to provide a better understanding of social reality and to open unexpected paths to political criticism and action.

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¹¹ For the sake of brevity, I will leave aside the political dimension of the conflictual relationship between pragmatism and psychoanalysis.

¹² I would like to thank Valentina Petrolini for pointing to this aspect and for her important comments on a previous version of the paper.

¹³ Accordingly, I only partially agree with Philip Rieff’s statement that Dewey lacks the conceptual tools to understand regressive phenomena adequately.

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