

**»I Will Have Finished Tomorrow«  
The Harsh reality of the Human Sexual Function**

by Leon S. Brenner

While biologists would identify the most essential human sexual function as copulation, psychoanalysts have designated it as an *inhibited form of masturbation* (Žižek, 2009, p. 82). This is to say that, according to the Freudian tradition, the *reality* of human sexuality does without the ‘real’ flesh of the body. It is solely sustained by a phantasmatic framework: in the subject’s relationship with a fantasized object. This libidinal vicissitude was attributed by Lacan (2011) to the whole of humanity and called the *masturbatory jouissance of the idiot* (p. 81).<sup>1</sup>

This harsh *reality* of the human sexual function is captured in Freud’s description of the *pleasure principle* and its reliance on the *reality principle*. According to Freud (1911), any psychic process that seeks sexual satisfaction obeys the pleasure principle, making it strive towards gaining pleasure and avoid arousing unpleasure (p. 218). At the outset, these processes attempt at gaining pleasure by means of hallucination. It is only when these means fail in providing satisfaction that the psychical apparatus forms a conception of a *reality* of psychic objects separated from the subject’s hallucinations. This is where a new principle of psychic functioning is introduced: the reality principle (p. 219).

However, Freud (1911) insists that the introduction of the reality principle does not cancel out the pleasure principle, it perpetuates it (p. 222). In other words, it merely comes to assure the satisfaction of the pleasure principle, supplying a new indirect path towards pleasure.

In this context, Freud moves away from a naïve conception of the reality principle as representing a single objective reality that gives shape to our thoughts. In contrast, Freud’s refined conception of the reality principle postulates that it introduces a mediating psychic interface that enables the subject to delay immediate satisfaction in the aim of future satisfaction. This conception transposes the human sexual function from the realm of the immediate phenomenological experience to the future anterior.

Future anterior is a grammatical tense used to describe an action that will have been completed at some point in the future. It is formed by using the auxiliary verb

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<sup>1</sup> ‘ιδιώτης’ in the Greek sense, referring to a private person or someone who is not involved in public affairs or political life.

»will have« + the past participle of the main verb. For example, »I will have finished my work by tomorrow« describes an action (finishing work) that will be completed in the future (by tomorrow), but is spoken of as already having been completed.

Lacan had made extensive use of the concept of the future anterior in his work (e.g. Lacan, 2006, pp. 37-38, 247). According to Lacan, the future anterior is a grammatical representation of the way that human desire is oriented towards a future state that is always out of reach. It describes the way the subject is constantly looking forward to a completeness or wholeness that can never be attained.

Desire's grammatical tendency towards the future anterior depends on memory and the capacity to attribute future satisfaction to psychic representations. Because language is the medium through which memory is stored and the future can be represented, we deduce that the mediating psychic interface introduced by the reality principle is language by itself. Accordingly, Lacan (1992) intimated that the pleasure principle, the primary unconscious process regulating the distribution of libidinal energy between representations, cannot operate without these representations (p. 27). This is why, according to Lacan (1997), the reality principle is the delayed-action of the pleasure principle: it gives us access to it in retrospect through the medium of language (p. 60).

So we see that both for Freud and Lacan, there is no pleasure without some kind of *reality* that gives us access to it. In other words, the *real* of the body's pleasure cannot be imagined or symbolized if not through the medium of language; language demarcating the confines of the body's pleasure.

This is why Freud conceives of sexual satisfaction as being structurally *inhibited*. In this frame of reference, inhibition is conceived as a disruption in the work of the pleasure principle: an obstacle to the eroticization of the human sexual function.<sup>2</sup> It sets a limit to the pleasure principle through the reality principle, which preserves libido at a minimum through its investment in language. Freud describes inhibition as a turning away of the libido from an excessive eroticization of the sexual function. For Lacan, this translates to desire's tendency to shift from one signifier to another in its aim around the *objet petite a*.

What Freud (1938) so intuitively uncovers in his notes published in »Ergebnisse, Ideen, Probleme: London, Juni 1938«, is how the lack of the orgasm in infantile sexuality fixes itself as a model in the human sexual function. This fixation is in turn revealed in adulthood in the structural inhibition imposed by the reality principle, which renders the orgasm to be inherently lacking in satisfaction: that satisfaction, when it is mediated through language, is never whole, direct (p. 300). Freud further notes that this structural inhibition at the very core of the human sexual function

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<sup>2</sup> We can conceive of six different types of inhibition in Freud's work. See: Stevens (2007).

duplicates itself in instances of intellectual and work inhibition in adulthood as well as other spheres such as absences, laughing outbreaks, weeping, and more.

Every coin holds a tale of two faces. Accordingly, a lesson taught by psychoanalysis is that, in the exchange of coins of pleasure, the reality of the sexual function exposes us both to the working of inhibition as well as to the function of desire. Reality then is the emblem of the subject's deferred desire or, to put in another way, inhibition is the place where desire expresses itself, but only insofar as it is held back, indefinitely delayed and put on hold. And this has all sorts of consequences on the sexual act.

Taking that into account, I might jokingly suggest that the lesson we learn from Freud's short intervention in his notes from 1938, is that, at the height of sexual pleasure, when your partner asks you, »Did you finish?«, the most honest answer would be, »I will have finished by tomorrow.«

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