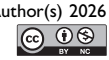
Check for updates

Original Research Article

HHS

History of the Human Sciences
1–26
© The Author(s) 2026

Article reuse guidelines:
sagepub.com/journals-permissions
DOI: 10.1177/09526951261474757
journals.sagepub.com/home/hhs


Immunitary Anxiety: Freud, Psychical Self-Protection, and the Paradigm of Immunization

Nicholas Ray[1]

Abstract

This article presents a new account of Freud's theorization of anxiety. It traces a line in his thinking that increasingly emphasizes anxiety's capacity to protect the subject against external dangers. This notion of protective anxiety first emerges in the *Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis* (1917/2024g); is successively amplified and re-elaborated in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920/2024i) and *Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety* (1926/2024k); and remains in place in Freud's doctrine thereafter. Starting from Freud's (1926/2024k) description of "signal anxiety" as an "inoculation" that forestalls full-blown anxiety attacks that may be triggered by external danger, the paper argues that his protective theory of anxiety as a whole takes shape within a broader epistemic horizon—a horizon which the paper refers to as "immunitary" and which is described with reference to the historical and philosophical work of Roberto Esposito and to the work of Ed Cohen. The three key Freudian texts of 1917, 1920 and 1926 are examined in detail, in order to show how far the anxiety theory takes shape along immunitary lines and how pervasive a role this comes to play in Freud's conception of the orientation and operation of the psychical apparatus.

Keywords

anxiety theory, immunity, immunitary paradigm, metapsychology, Sigmund Freud

The development of Freud's thinking on anxiety is commonly separated into two successive theories: a "first" theory outlined in the 1890s then adapted over three decades till the mid-1920s, and a "second" theory formally introduced in *Inhibitions, Symptoms and*

[1]University of Leeds, UK

Corresponding Author:
Nicholas Ray, School of English, University of Leeds, 10 Cavendish Road, Leeds, LS2 9JT, UK.
Email: n.j.ray@leeds.ac.uk

Anxiety in 1926 and sustained thereafter, being recapitulated with little modification into the 1930s (Quinodoz, 2004/2005, p. 34). As substantive as are the distinctions between the first and second theories, in this article I want to underline the significance of a different theoretical reorientation which cuts across this conventional separation: that is, one which is initially broached at a mature stage of the first theory, around 1917, but which feeds directly into the second and ultimately flourishes in it. As we'll see, this reorientation is complex and not entirely linear. Broadly speaking, however, it involves the following: Freud's earliest view of anxiety as an inexpedient manifestation of endogenous energetic tensions is increasingly supplemented, and eventually largely supplanted, by a view of anxiety as a potentially expedient mechanism capable of sheltering the mental apparatus against exogenous contingencies that threaten its energetic equilibrium.

What makes this development so momentous in the first instance is that it alters the very parameters of Freud's metapsychology. Previously, his metapsychological reflections had been largely oriented by questions of intrapsychic defense, that is, the dynamic mechanisms operative between the mental agencies. The reorientation in the anxiety theory beginning in 1917 brings another defensive "front" decisively into view; namely, the terrain on which the psychical system protects itself against an outside world conceived of as being replete with pathogenic dangers. Not only does this terrain now become formally integrated into Freud's account of psychical life and survival; as I will show, it ends up by 1926 circumscribing it almost entirely, much of the inner dynamics of the apparatus being repositioned as the function of a more fundamental confrontation between the dangers inherent in the outer milieu and the precarious capacities of anxiety to protect us from them.

To be sure, the emergence of this front is not the first occasion when Freud's thought concerns itself with the question of external danger vis-à-vis the psychical apparatus. Much of the early work of the 1890s—including *Studies on Hysteria* (Freud & Breuer, 1895/2024) and papers on the "seduction theory"—had developed specifically traumatic etiologies of neurotic illness. But not only did the problem of external danger diminish with the recession of these etiologies which soon followed; their elaboration, at least in published material, did not involve a systematic theorization of protective mechanisms oriented directly against the external milieu. Nor was anything of the kind offered by the first fully "psychoanalytic" topography set out in *The Interpretation of Dreams* (Freud, 1900/2024b, ch. 7) or the metapsychological papers of the 1910s. Freud did posit the existence of such a mechanism in his early, unpublished neurological treatise "Project for a Scientific Psychology" (1950[1895]/2024p), where he described "nerve-ending apparatuses" that somehow filtered external energy before it reached deeper neuronal layers. But this thesis, along with the rest of the text, was soon abandoned and never saw the light of day again during his lifetime. The concept of the "protective shield against stimuli," developed much later in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920/2024i), is often seen as the heir to this erased hypothesis (Laplanche & Pontalis, 1967/1973, p. 357); but as I will show, its emergence is integral to precisely the reorientation of anxiety theory that is my focus here. It is only in this later context that the very interface between inside and outside in Freud's account of the mind becomes not just a zone of perceptual transit but also of continuous protection and defense.

In addition to its relative novelty, however, Freud's positing of anxiety as a means of psychical self-protection is of particular interest owing to how he conceptualizes its operation. Curious as it may initially sound, we can, following the work of the philosopher Roberto Esposito, describe this conceptualization as "immunitary." I'll say more about Esposito's notion of the "paradigm of immunization" below. For now, I'll just observe that it refers to modes of protection and self-protection that operate through the preemptive deployment of the very threat which is to be repelled—a structure most obviously, though not only, exemplified by the biomedical understanding of immune system functioning. We can see the same structure at work in Freud's theorization to the extent that his gradual repositioning of anxiety as an instrument of protection against external danger is accompanied by an increasing tendency also to regard anxiety as the affective *consequence* of external danger in situations where protection fails. In the reorientation of the anxiety theory examined here, that's to say, anxiety emerges both as the psychical apparatus's means of self-protection and the one eventuality that the apparatus must above all protect itself from—an antinomy Freud resolves in an explicitly immunitary way, albeit with different points of emphasis in different texts: anxiety, activated preemptively and in controlled quantities, is the apparatus's means of staving off or of preventing exogenous threats that would otherwise give rise to anxiety in pathologically uncontrolled quantities. As he puts it in 1926, in the most developed expression of this view: "the ego subjects itself to anxiety as a sort of inoculation [*Impfung*], submitting to a slight attack of the illness in order to escape its full strength" (Freud, 1926/2024k, p. 143).

At stake in Freud's analogy—or so I want to propose—is more than just a local parallel between two otherwise heterogeneous processes, one biological, one psychical. The definitive entrance of the problem of exteroceptive self-protection into metapsychology marks the most productive point of juncture between Freud's thinking and an entire trajectory of distinctly modern reflection on the self as an entity defined by its capacity to defend against the outside world. Though the prevailing instantiation of this reflection is that of biological immunity, its conceptual roots go deeper, and its influence arguably pervades a remarkable variety of "other sectors and languages of our life" (Esposito, 2006, p. 52). With the development of Freud's anxiety theory, I argue, it makes a decisive extension into the psychological domain and leaves a defining mark on the Freudian subject.

The Idea of Self-Protection

Research devoted to the history of notions of self-protection and immunity has proliferated in recent years (see Mutsaers, 2016; Neocleous, 2022). To frame my account of protective anxiety in Freud, I will begin by outlining two important perspectives this research has yielded.

The first, which is broadly historical, emphasizes that the discovery of immune functioning in the late nineteenth century was not just one scientific development among others but helped to fundamentally reshape conceptions of living bodies and their relationship to the outside world. Immunity had this transformative effect because it did

not simply alter *how* organisms were understood to defend themselves; it introduced into science *for the first time* the notion that organisms were capable of doing so and must continuously do so to survive (Cohen, 2009, p. 3). Earlier medical frameworks that remained tied to a broadly Hippocratic epistemology tended to regard organisms as being "comprised of, and therefore inextricably linked to, the elements that constituted the world in which they lived" (Cohen, 2008, pp. 106–107). Illness was supposed to result from "imbalances among these constitutive or ambient elements," and health to emerge from a restoration of "harmony" both within the organism itself and between the organism and its environment (Cohen, 2008, p. 107). The scientific legitimation of germ theory as early as the 1860s already began to engender a new understanding of disease as resulting from the action of exogenous microscopic pathogens. The "founding father of immunology," Élie Metchnikoff's, complementary discovery a few years later that bodies "invaded" by such pathogens work to counteract them at the cellular level, gave rise to a break from the old Hippocratic frameworks (Cohen, 2008, p. 107). Henceforth, the relationship between organisms and their environments was recast in agonistic terms, the interface between the inner-world and the lifeworld becoming a frontier of conflict, and health becoming dependent not on the concordance between inner and outer, between "self" and "other," but on a successful struggle of the one against the other ("fighting off" disease, etc.). As Ed Cohen (2009, p. 8) has argued, the "modern body" incarnated by the discovery of immunity is a much more "atomized" entity than its Hippocratic forebears, distinguished not so much by a vital continuity with its milieu as by a necessary discontinuity; essentially vulnerable within a hostile world, its survival is a "ceaseless problem of boundary maintenance."

As Cohen's remarks acknowledge, the consequences of the discovery of biological immunity have been extensive, not just in biomedicine as a discipline but in our daily experience as embodied selves. The point I wish to underline here is simply that it was this discovery that established as a broad axiom of medical science the idea that living beings are of necessity self-protective beings, that is, individualized entities that must dynamically and continuously defend themselves against the external world and must do so because the latter is fraught with pathogenic dangers.

Putting aside its technical specificities momentarily, we can say that Freud's introduction of the question of self-protection into metapsychology after 1917 is more than just an event in the history of his thinking. It also requires us to see his thinking as, in part, an event in the history of this modern reconceptualization of life. The direction in which Freud takes anxiety theory after 1917 at once presupposes the axiom that living beings are dynamically self-protective and transposes it from the biological to the psychological field, systematically making exteroceptive defense a capacity and a necessity of the mind as well as the body.

Previous commentators (Macmillan, 1991, ch. 5; Makari, 2008, ch. 3) have noted adumbrations of this transposition in Freud's early work of the 1890s. In this period, Freud's etiological approach to understanding hysteria, which was distinctive for emphasizing causative factors rather than just the description of symptoms, emulated the strategies of the pioneers of germ theory in relation to infectious disease. Moreover, the causative factors he isolated—memories of traumatic events that acted like "foreign

bodies" (*Fremdkörper*) in the mind (Freud & Breuer, 1895/2024, p. 6)—were psychical analogs of the invading disease agents ("germs") that Pasteur, Koch and others identified under the microscope. However, it is in the later theoretical developments which are the focus of the present article that the transposition is most fully effected, since it's here that psychical mechanisms of exteroceptive protection are first substantively theorized. It's no accident that these developments are, as we will note, coeval with the period in which trauma, after a long abeyance, makes a major resurgence in Freud's thinking—first, thanks to the clinical phenomenon of traumatic neuroses among the casualties of World War I, and second thanks to the theoretical interventions of Otto Rank (1924/1929) on the "trauma of birth." These factors bring the problem of extra-psychic danger back to the forefront of Freud's reflection, where, this time, it takes a permanent place, exerting a decisive influence on the conceptualization of the psychical system.

Self-Protection and/as Negation

The other perspective I want to mention derives from the work of Roberto Esposito, who has undertaken an extensive historico-philosophical interrogation of the concept of immunity and its pervasive force in the modern imaginary. It isn't my intention to examine his thought in depth; only to isolate two interrelated aspects that are relevant here. The first is something already alluded to above. It concerns the "structurally aporetic" character of self-protection crystallized most strikingly—though, Esposito insists, not solely—by the discovery of biological immunity, particularly acquired immunity (Esposito, 2002/2011, p. 6).

Acquired immunity is that form of protection achieved through exposure or inoculation, the introduction of non-lethal quantities of a pathogen stimulating the formation of antibodies which are then able to neutralize the dangerous effects of any subsequent infection. What Esposito calls the structural aporia here consists in the fact that the immune mechanism "functions precisely through the use of what it opposes" (Esposito, 2002/2011, p. 7). The organism protects itself against the danger not by "frontal opposition" (Esposito, 2002/2011, p. 7) to it, nor by its "eliminat[ion]" (Esposito, 2002/2011, p. 159), but by the preemptive incorporation of it in attenuated form. What emerges is a conception of life that is not simply self-protective but which, to be self-protective, must also be somehow "separate[d] from itself," since it must include within it something that "subtly contradicts" or "negates" it. The immunitary process thus "retains its objective in the horizon of meaning of its opposite"; that is to say, it "prolong[s] life but only by continuously giving it a taste of death" (Esposito, 2002/2011k, pp. 8–9).

Esposito's concern with this structure extends beyond its manifestation in bioscience. At the core of his thinking is the striking claim that the same "homeopathic dialectic" (Esposito, 2002/2011, p. 89) exerts an organizing influence over modern *political* categories and social systems.[1] That's to say that in Esposito's account not only is modern social and political life increasingly ordered around exigencies of protection and security, making modern politics a "biopolitics"; no less importantly, protection and security are increasingly sought by means of an "immunitary logic" (Esposito, 2004/2008, p. 132)

according to which the threat itself is preemptively incorporated and strategically deployed. He shows that the conceptual roots of this phenomenon reach back beyond the advent of scientific immunology, even if the latter eventually becomes a point of convergence and a functional model for a variety of "traditions of thinking" that have entailed precursors of the aporetic structure just outlined (Esposito, 2004/2008, p. 50). His effort to trace these roots in the sphere of political philosophy begins with Thomas Hobbes who both introduces "the question of *conservatio vitae*" (Esposito, 2004/2008, p. 57) into the center of politics—since social life, left to its own, would in Hobbes's view self-destruct in reciprocal violence—and conceptualizes the solution in implicitly "immunitary" terms: man's natural inclination for violence must not be eliminated but exclusively concentrated in the prerogative of the sovereign capable of wielding it strategically, a tolerable "fear of the state" thus protecting the community from collapsing into the unbridled "state of fear" that would obtain in the primordial war of all against all (Esposito, 1998/2010, p. 29). Excavating the immunitary logic that has continued to mark theories of sociality since Hobbes, and which has subsequently found a legitimating echo in the "natural" domain of biology, Esposito contends that this "paradigm of immunization," as he calls it, and the aporia it implies, has become "the linchpin around which both the real and imaginary practices of an entire civilization have been constructed" (Esposito, 2008/2013, pp. 58–59).

Particularly significant in all of this is the fact that Esposito's genealogy of immunitary social theories since Hobbes already includes Freud. Specifically, it acknowledges an intellectual trajectory "extend[ing] from Freud to Norbert Elias" and marked by the recognition of "civilization's necessarily inhibiting character" (Esposito, 2004/2008, p. 48). In this line of thought, which shares with Hobbes an assumption about humankind's "natural aggressivity" (Esposito, 1998/2010, p. 35), civilization thwarts the potential for continuous external conflict by driving it inwards, enclosing conflict "within the confines of the individual psyche" (Esposito, 2004/2008, p. 48). This is the model Freud elaborates in *Civilization and its Discontents*: paradoxically, the destructive impulses that represent the greatest threat to sociality are redirected to become the very motor of the superego, which henceforth belabors the ego and brings about the inhibition of drives necessary for living in common. It is a model, Esposito argues, in which the "immunitary dialectic is expressed in its most concentrated form" (Esposito, 2004/2008, p. 49).

The theoretical path in Freud that I want to bring to light here isn't that of the sociocultural writing, which Esposito already emphasizes. The anxiety theory as such evolves in respect of individual rather than social psychology. But these two modalities are hardly disconnected. On the contrary, the anxiety theory developed during more than a decade prior to *Civilization* undergirds the immunitary account of sociality Esposito finds there. It is after all on the model of anxiety set out in *Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety* that the internalized drama described in *Civilization* rests. The ego's renunciations of drives are "to begin with" (Freud, 1930/2024l, p. 112) activated precisely by anxiety in one of its protective forms; that is, a controlled release of anxiety which signals that the fulfillment of the impulse would give rise to an overwhelmingly anxiogenic "loss of love" (e.g., from a parent or their superegoic avatar) (Freud, 1930/2024l, p. 115). My discussion here, then, isn't counter to Esposito's but complementary. It indicates that Freud's mature

theorization of sociality, which Esposito affiliates with a genealogy of immunitary social theory going back to Hobbes, is directly innervated by the emergence of an immunitary logic at the level of Freud's metapsychology; that is, both the transposition into metapsychology of the principle of organic self-protection and the structurally aporetic character of the mechanism envisaged (anxiety protecting against anxiety).

The second relevant matter Esposito's perspective discloses is the "constitutively ambivalent" nature of immunitary protection (Esposito, 2020, p. 75). By this he means that immunity not only makes preemptive use of what "contradicts" or "negates" life; when pushed beyond a certain threshold of operation, it can itself negate the life it should protect. This is what transpires in the biological sphere when a body experiences certain kinds of autoimmune attack or "overactive defense" (Esposito, 2002/2011, p. 163), and analogously in the socio-political sphere when the imperative to protect the polis's security, identity etc., requires the "sacrifice" of "every form of qualified life" (Esposito, 2008/2013, p. 61). In each case a surplus of defense becomes, paradoxically, self-destructive. So, Esposito argues, immunitary protection is distinctive for its inherent potential to intensify into a source of danger itself, its salvific quality being always dependent on a quantitative limiting of its action.

If in Freud's metapsychology the self-protection of the psychical system follows the aporetic logic of like-against-like prophylaxis, it also shares this structural ambivalence. Anxiety, that's to say, not only takes on a protective character in the theoretical revisions after 1917; it turns out to be expedient only insofar as its expression is strategically restricted: above a certain limit of activity, Freud will observe from the outset, it acquires a pathological tonality in its own right. Reimagined as the indispensable psychical safeguard, anxiety becomes a protective force that nonetheless always threatens to escalate, out of all proportion with the actuality of external danger, to the point of impairing the subject it is meant to protect.[2]

Freud's Anxiety Theory: 1895–1917

Before examining the protective view of anxiety that Freud develops, and to help get our bearings in this knotty area of his thought, I want to briefly sketch the key features of his understanding of anxiety prior to its emergence.[3]

His earliest systematic account—forming the basis of what will subsequently be called his "first" theory of anxiety—dates from the 1890s and focuses almost entirely on pathological manifestations of anxiety that he groups under the novel heading of "anxiety neurosis" (Freud, 1950[1892–99]/2024o; 1895/2024a). The theory here is essentially "economic": i.e., to do with the expression of quantities of endogenous energy. Freud proposes that to achieve discharge, physical sexual energy must attach to corresponding sexual ideas in the psychical sphere capable of triggering the "specific action" to satisfy it (Freud, 1895/2024a, p. 111). However, when sexual energy is instead deflected from the psychical sphere—owing to psychological underdevelopment, organic decline, or what he calls active "suppression," i.e., "defense" (Freud, 1950[1892–99]/2024o, p. 222)—it will eventually build to an insupportable degree. The result is anxiety, the latter being

nothing less than a transformation and unregulated outlet of an excess of deflected sexual energy.

Over the next 20-odd years Freud's thinking on anxiety consists largely in developments of this libidinal/economic approach and its integration within the parameters of psychoanalytic theory that subsequently evolve.

The key development is the extension of the theory from anxiety neurosis to the etiology of anxiety hysteria (i.e., phobia), foregrounded in two major case histories: "Little Hans" (1909/2024d) and the "Wolf Man" (1918[1914]/2024h). As we've just seen, in his previous writing on anxiety neurosis Freud had included the defensive "suppression" of libido at the psychical level as a potential causative factor in the condition. In the subsequent work on anxiety hysteria, he positions psychical defense against libido as *the* distinguishing factor in the etiology of phobias. He also rearticulates its mechanism in terms of the metapsychological framework he has since evolved, replacing the terms "defense" and "suppression" with "repression" (*Verdrängung*) and describing the formation of the phobic symptom with reference to the differential fates of the two components of repressed sexual drives: the ideational representative is struck out of consciousness but the unwanted libidinal energy itself, which cannot be so expelled, comes instead to be "set free in the shape of anxiety" which eventually fixes on some phobic object (Freud, 1909/2024d, p. 115). In the case of the Wolf Man, for instance, the intolerable idea of desire for his father is banished from the patient's consciousness while its libidinal energy is transformed into the paralyzing "fear of [*Angst vor*] a wolf" (Freud, 1915/2024f, p. 155). Thus, phobic anxiety too is a derivative of deflected libido and repression is recognized as a major cause of libido's transformation into affect, its theoretical significance becoming increasingly central after the turn of the century as Freud's clinical interest in anxiety neurosis declines.

A second development, facilitated by Freud's (1905/2024c) theorization of infantile sexuality, extends the libidinal/economic theory of anxiety to common childhood fears (e.g., fear of the dark, fear of strangers). Such states of feeling are, Freud proposes, a discharging of—typically Oedipal—sexual energy which is "unemployed," not owing to repression but simply to a lack of satisfaction from the objects desired: thus, a frustrated longing for the mother's beloved face becomes fear of unfamiliar faces; a frustrated longing for her presence at night becomes fear of the dark itself (Freud, 1917/2024g, p. 360).

Anxiety as Protection in the *Introductory Lectures* (1917)

In the *Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis* (1917/2024g), Freud includes a lecture on "Anxiety"—the first text dedicated exclusively to this topic since the early writing on anxiety neurosis (i.e., Freud, 1895/2024a). In it, he reaffirms the validity of the theory established in the 1890s and describes the two developments of it that we have just noted. But he also makes a new departure, outlining a first full theorization of anxiety's adaptive and protective functions.

He broaches this idea within the framework of a categorical differentiation he introduces in the lecture between "neurotic anxiety" (*neurotische Angst*) and "realistic anxiety" (*Realangst*). The former encompasses those pathological manifestations of

anxiety that are direct transformations of deflected libido: phobias as well as anxiety neurosis. *Realangst*, however, designates localized and largely evanescent experiences of anxiety that are reactions to "external danger," the term "*Real"* indicating this reference to the contingencies of the outside world (Freud, 1917/2024g, p. 347). Freud had in fact briefly touched on this mode of anxiety in the 1895 article, referring to it as "the affect of anxiety" but offering little elaboration and declining to say anything explicit about the role of libido in its production (1895/2024a, p. 112). In the *Introductory Lectures*, the function of realistic anxiety is greatly expanded, and its derivation is integrated into the new framework of the libido theory that has evolved since the introduction of narcissism in 1914: realistic anxiety can, he now suggests, be specifically "attribute[d] […] to ego-libido" (Freud, 1917/2024g, p. 380).

The "Anxiety" lecture dissects realistic anxiety into two aspects. There is a wholly inexpedient aspect he calls the "generation of anxiety" (*Angstentwicklung*), which occurs when the subject, faced with an external danger, is overwhelmed by affect to the point of relative paralysis: a debilitating attack of anxiety (Freud, 1917/2024g, p. 348). The other aspect Freud describes is a "preparedness for […] danger" (Freud, 1917/2024g, p. 348), achieved *by means of* anxiety. It is expedient and involves a limited anticipatory release of affect whose consequences are essentially protective.

Now, Freud further subdivides protective, anticipatory anxiety into two kinds. First, he claims, it may operate as a psychical "signal" that danger is approaching, one that serves as a trigger for specific motor reactions at the level of the body: flight or even physical defense (Freud, 1917/2024g, p. 395). Second, in a rapid description of the distinctions between anxiety (*Angst*), fear (*Furcht*), and fright (*Schreck*), he also proposes that the very activation of preparatory anxiety may itself somehow exert a protective effect at a psychological level:

> I shall avoid going more closely into the question of whether our linguistic usage means the same thing or something clearly different by "*Angst* [anxiety]," "*Furcht* [fear]*"* and "*Schreck* [fright]." I will say only that I think "*Angst*" relates to the state and disregards the object, while "*Furcht*" draws attention precisely to the object. It seems that "*Schreck*," on the other hand, does have a special sense; it lays emphasis, that is, on the effect produced by a danger which is not met with any preparedness of anxiety [*Angstbereitschaft*]. We might say, therefore, that a person protects [*schütze*] himself from fright by anxiety. (Freud, 1917/2024g, p. 349)

In other words, to the extent that anxiety is a general anticipation of danger that—in contrast to fear—does not presuppose any particular object, it *insulates* the mind from the experience of fright (*Schreck*) because it preempts the possibility of our being taken entirely by surprise by a dangerous external contingency.

These two modalities of protective anxiety will be at the forefront of the developments in the theory that unfold over the next few years. Not, let us note, that Freud will ever systematically integrate them with one another. In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle,* he will emphasize the mode of anxiety that insulates against fright; in *Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety*, where the libidinal theory of anxiety is relinquished and the so-called "second" anxiety theory is formally introduced, he will emphasize a

significantly expanded version of the signal function. But how the two might be articulated together or relate to each other is never explicitly formulated. Rather, what we end up with are two successive elaborations of protective anxiety that, as we will see, share a common immunitary structure.

Before examining these elaborations, let's note that this immunitary structure is already implicitly present in the embryonic account of protective anxiety sketched in the lecture—its characteristics distributed, in an as yet disarticulated way, across the exposition of the two kinds respectively.

On the one hand, the protection afforded by anxiety is of a markedly ambivalent kind. This is because the difference between the two aspects of realistic anxiety—protective anxiety and *Angstentwicklung*—is quantitative not qualitative. As Freud puts it in his account of the anxiety signal, this protective release of anxiety that may trigger flight *is* a generation of anxiety (*Angstentwicklung*), only "limited to a mere abortive beginning"; the more it is so limited, he observes, "the more expedient will be the shape taken by the whole course of events" (Freud, 1917/2024g, p. 348). But since the passage from one to the other is thus purely a matter of quantity, there is always a risk of protective anxiety escalating into an inexpedient anxiety attack, paralyzing the subject dangerously instead of triggering a motor reaction. Indeed, it is precisely this ambivalence that enables Freud to integrate protective anxiety into the original theory that anxiety derives from libido and to differentiate it from the non-libidinal exigencies of self-preservation. While the motor action of flight is certainly a manifestation of a "self-preservative drive," the anxiety capable of triggering it must, on the contrary, belong to libido since, carried beyond a certain threshold, this anxiety winds up becoming inimical to self-preservation as such (Freud, 1917/2024g, p. 380).[4]

On the other hand, there is an implicitly homeopathic structure at work in the modality of anxiety that Freud claims insulates us against fright—implicit inasmuch as his nomenclature does not yet formally acknowledge it in the way that it subsequently will (as for instance, at the later point that we noted above when he describes protective anxiety as an affective "inoculation"). The terminological distinction between *Angst* and *Schreck* ("anxiety" and "fright") should not prevent us from seeing that they are consubstantial modes of affect. As Jean Laplanche (1980/2006, p. 62) notes, *Schreck* and *Angstentwicklung* are never firmly differentiated in Freud's work. Both are names for the unmastered affective process triggered by external danger, though with the difference—at least at the stage when Freud writes the lecture—that *Angstentwicklung* does not necessarily entail the factor of surprise characterizing *Schreck*. In fact, Freud eventually finds less and less cause to remark even this difference: *Schreck*, Laplanche observes, will increasingly drop out of his vocabulary and its signification will be entirely absorbed into *Angstentwicklung* and a companion term I will discuss later: "automatic anxiety" (*automatische Angst*). In short, the experience of fright may be prevented by the activation of anticipatory anxiety, but in the conceptual economy of Freud's thinking fright itself is practically equivalent to an acute anxiety episode. What we have, then, is an immunitary operation whereby the possibility of being flooded by anxiety is forestalled by preemptive doses of the same affect.

Preparedness of Anxiety in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920)

As I've noted, when Freud takes up the thread of protective anxiety 3 years after the *Introductory Lectures* in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, he concerns himself with only one of the two facets of it outlined in 1917: its capacity to insulate the psychical apparatus against fright, something which he names definitively "*Angstbereitschaft*" or "preparedness of anxiety."[5] He resumes this notion in chapter 4 of *Beyond* in the context of a set of important reflections on "traumatic neurosis"—a psychopathology that had imposed itself on medicine with great urgency in the wake of the recent world war (Breger, 2000, ch. 18). These reflections constitute Freud's first systematic theorization of trauma and traumatic etiology since the abandoned seduction hypothesis of the 1890s. Central to them is an amplified redescription of the anxiety mechanism sketched in the lecture, together with a new psychophysiological rationale for the mechanism's genesis. Both aspects of this account are of interest, but I will start with the redescription of the anxiety mechanism.

As in the lecture, this mechanism turns on the relationship between anxiety (*Angst*) and fright (*Schreck*). Once again, the latter is characterized as a reaction to an event of external danger that takes the subject by "surprise," and the former as a general (i.e., non-object-specific) anticipation of external danger which can safeguard the subject against fright (Freud, 1920/2024i, pp. 12–13). But both categories are also now given a further, important determination in terms of their relation to energetics. In situations of fright, the subject, by virtue of being unprepared for the danger, is overwhelmed by the massive and direct influx of stimulus it produces. Raw energy "breaks in" to the mental apparatus from the outside without any intervening inhibition or regulation, and the result, Freud says, is traumatic neurosis (Freud, 1920/2024i, p. 29). Its symptoms are propelled by an exigency to "master" the stimulus *post facto*, a task so urgent that it may involve a deactivation of the pleasure principle itself and a subjection of the individual to painful and compulsive repetitions (e.g., nightmares) of the original event. *Angstbereitschaft*, on the other hand, operates as a preventive barrier against fright, and thus against traumatization, because, Freud suggests, it "hypercathects" the receptive system of the psychical apparatus in advance: that is, it mobilizes and gathers there controlled quantities of internal psychical energy (Freud, 1920/2024i, p. 31). A highly cathected system, he claims, is more capable of "binding" stimulus from outside; so, should a dangerous event occur, the general preemptive mobilization of anxiety primes the system to inhibit and metabolize any major influx *as it occurs*, thus working to prevent an invasion of the system by insupportable quantities of "unbound" external energy. In short, preparatory anxiety is a means by which the psychical apparatus achieves a certain refractoriness against the incursions of pathogenically dangerous external energies; correlatively, in situations where it is not preemptively activated, or where the hypercathexis mobilized is simply unequal to the magnitude of the event, the resulting fright eventuates in traumatic illness.

What Freud delivers here is a fuller version of the operation described in the lecture, more granular in detail but the same in outline. As to its immunitary dimension, this is, at one level, also the same, inasmuch as there remains a certain consubstantiality between the means of protection (*Angst*) and the state of feeling whose causation it prevents

(*Schreck*). Indeed, on this occasion Freud's English editors add a note underlining the paradox that—as already observed—fright, which a low dose of anxiety supposedly forestalls, is basically indistinguishable from what Freud elsewhere describes as a full-blown attack of anxiety.[6]

However, there is also a deepening and enrooting of immunitary logic in this account. It emerges in Freud's well-known but complex psychophysiological description of the origins of the mental apparatus earlier in the same chapter, a description that directly precedes the explanation of *Angstbereitschaft* and seeks to furnish it with a developmental rationale and a fixed somatic underpinning. Let us briefly recall Freud's remarks.

The Vesicle and the Protective Shield

He asks us to picture a hypothetical organism of the "most simplified possible" kind: "an undifferentiated vesicle of a substance that is susceptible to stimulation" (Freud, 1920/2024i, p. 25). Even in such an elementary being, he tells us, certain differentiations must arise at its periphery if it is to survive at all. It must have a surface layer capable of receiving external stimuli, and the ceaseless exposure of this layer to their impact must temper it—"bake [it] through"—so that it becomes a kind of "crust" capable of conducting exogenous excitations inwards without itself being further modified by them (Freud, 1920/2024i, p. 26). Moreover, since as a living being it possesses its own internal energy level dangerously incommensurate with the "enormous energies" of its external milieu, it must also develop around its receptive layer an "envelope or membrane" that constitutes a "protective shield" (*Reizschutz*), limiting the quantity of stimulus that can pass through and thus preventing the organism's otherwise inevitable "destruction" by outside forces (Freud, 1920/2024i, p. 27).

This organismic model is not just a heuristic metaphor for the mental apparatus; it is a simplified account of the somatic substrata from which certain aspects of the mental apparatus are supposedly derived. The corporeal differentiations that are the conditions of survival for the vesicle, Freud insists, necessarily have equivalents in all organic bodies, including ours, the complexity of these equivalents increasing in proportion with the overall organic complexity that a species acquires in its evolution. Indeed here, as so often, Freud's argumentation leans on Ernst Haeckel's biogenetic law according to which ontogenesis involves an accelerated "recapitulation of developmental history" (Freud, 1920/2024i, p. 26). From this point of view, every organism at its earliest embryonic stage more or less replicates the form of the primitive vesicle itself; only, in more complex beings, maturation progresses, and the various layers develop into ever more specialized apparatuses. Thus, for instance, the superficial receptive layer present in even the most basic living bodies is morphologically recapitulated in the ectoderm of the embryos of more complex beings; this, in turn, in some species, develops into a cerebral cortex. The mental apparatus in human beings—or at least the components of it that Freud addresses in this model—is then understood as a further specialization of the derivatives of the elementary corporeal layers manifested in the vesicle, these somatic surfaces gradually giving rise to specific psychical *functions*. So, owing to its capacity to receive stimuli without being modified by them, the cortical layer gives rise to the system of

consciousness which, as Freud (1900/2024b, p. 537) had long observed, is characterized by the fact that it registers external perceptions without being imprinted by any permanent mnemic trace (memory being a province of a deeper portion of the apparatus which preserves a retentive capacity). The "membrane" around the body of the organism, on the other hand, gives rise to protective functions that insulate the mind against experiences whose magnitude would otherwise disturb its energetic equilibrium and jam its normal operation. First among these functions of course is *Angstbereitschaft*, its resistive capacity now positioned as a direct psychical correlate of a somatic tegument.[7]

The concept of the protective shield is an important consolidation of the idea of self-protection per se in Freud's thinking. For one thing, it integrates into his theorization a certain model of organic self-protection—a model where survival as such is, in Ed Cohen's (2009, p. 8) phrase, "a ceaseless problem of boundary maintenance," albeit one where energies rather than living pathogens are the external danger to be repelled. By the same token, it extends this "problem" in a more systematic way than ever before to the psychical domain, the juncture between inside and outside the mental apparatus becoming a sort of guarded "frontier" (Derrida, 1980/1987, p. 348). Protective anxiety, loosely presented in 1917 as an apparently ad hoc mechanism, is now the mental avatar of a continuous and indispensable material barrier, integrated into a fixed topographical place at the system's periphery.

In addition to this, however, Freud's account of the shield also consolidates the implicitly immunitary structure that has marked the theory of protective anxiety from the start. It does so by inscribing that structure into the very functioning of the membrane Freud now posits as *Angstbereitschaft*'s organic antecedent. Here is how he describes the inception of the membrane on the outer edges of the primitive vesicle:

> [The vesicle] acquires the shield [in its purely organic dimension] in this way: its outermost surface ceases to have the structure proper to living matter, becomes to some degree inorganic and thenceforward functions as a special envelope or membrane resistant to stimuli. In consequence, the energies of the external world are able to pass into the next underlying layers, which have remained living, with only a fragment of their original intensity; and these layers can devote themselves, behind the protective shield, to the reception of the amounts of stimulus which have been allowed through it. By its death, the outer layer has saved all the deeper ones from a similar fate—unless, that is to say, stimuli reach it which are so strong that they break through the protective shield. (Freud, 1920/2024i, p. 27)

The membrane "saves" the vesicle from death by resisting dangerous incursions of high-intensity exogenic energy. But by the same token, the outer layer itself is nothing other than a portion of the vesicle that has died off—given up the "structure proper to living matter"—owing to its direct contact with the outside. Paradoxically, then, the life of the organism is protected precisely by means of a localized negation of it, and the external world is held safely at bay by means of a prophylactic absorption, in restricted quantities, of the pernicious energies active therein. Thus the efficacy of the somatic tegument—both that of the prototypical vesicle, and by extension, of every other living body—is conceived according to an immunitary logic. It is a form of protection achieved through

limited exposure and one that, to recall Esposito's formulation, "prolong[s] life […] but only by continuously giving it a taste of death" (Esposito, 2002/2011, p. 9).

To be sure, it is unclear how, if at all, Freud imagines the "acquisition" of the membrane being integrated into the new theoretical framework that will dominate subsequent chapters of *Beyond*, namely the theory of the life and death drives and their mutual "opposition" (Freud, 1920/2024i, p. 57n1). On the one hand, he refrains from explicitly connecting the "becoming […] inorganic [*anorganisch*]" of the organism's periphery—which seems to be practically unavoidable anyway—with the action of the death drive. On the other, since he subsequently characterizes the death drive as an urge to "return […] to inorganic [*anorganischen*] existence" (Freud, 1920/2024i, p. 38), he appears to leave the door open to this connection being made, such that the membrane might be conceived as the outcome of some originary accommodation between the impulse to survive and the impulse to expire. What's clear, in any case, is that whatever antipolarity may supervene at the level of the drives, Freud's account of the shield's genesis predicates the capacity for any organic life to endure at all on a relationship of life to death which is structurally aporetic—defined, that is, not by frontal opposition but by the prophylactic inclusion of one within the other.[8] The vital necessity of the outer tegument means there can be no life that is not already separated from itself, so to speak, by the safely necrotizing assimilation of outside forces which in their fullest extent would be lethal; no life that does not first of all shield itself *from* death *by* death.

So, if, relative to the outline given in 1917, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* doesn't greatly evolve the immunitary character of anxiety as such, it nevertheless entrenches it, building round it a broader topographic structure that bears an immunitary imprint through and through. The latent antinomy according to which anxiety is both something that shields us and something against which we must be shielded is here genetically tied to a more elementary antinomy projected into the vital order. The paradoxical operation of protective anxiety now finds an echo in the fabric of the body itself.

Theoretical Revisions in *Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety* (1926)

With its focus on *Angstbereitschaft*, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* concerns itself fairly narrowly with a specific aspect of anxiety's functioning and puts into abeyance broader theoretical questions concerning the nature and source of anxiety and the variety of its modalities. The distinction Freud had introduced in 1917 between neurotic anxiety (*neurotische Angst*) and realistic anxiety (*Realangst*) goes unmentioned. The exploration of anxiety in *Beyond* falls squarely in the domain of *Realangst*, yet he declines to invoke this terminology in the text, and he leaves out of account altogether the category of neurotic anxiety. It is notable too that his longstanding claim that anxiety is derived from libido—a claim which in 1917 he had also sought to extend to the genesis of realistic anxiety—is never explicitly mentioned in *Beyond*; still less does he try to articulate it with the revised theory of the drives he introduces there.

Freud's next intervention on the subject, *Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety* (Freud, 1926/2024k), brings the wider picture back squarely into view. However, rather than

simply assimilate the developments of *Beyond* into the framework of the existing anxiety theory, this text delivers a wholesale revision of the wider framework itself, both utilizing and tacitly recalibrating certain conceptual resources of *Beyond* along the way. This revised framework—the "second" theory—overturns the former "economic" hypothesis on the origin of anxiety and radically rethinks the relationship between neurotic and realistic anxiety. Partly impelled by his own recent (Freud, 1924/2024j) retheorization of the ego and its functions vis-à-vis the internal and external worlds, it gives a central place to a new dimension of anxiety's protective operation: namely, its utility for the ego as a "signal" of danger—an idea that, as we've seen, Freud sketched in the lecture but declined to take up in *Beyond*.[9] Furthermore, *Inhibitions* simultaneously enacts a massive expansion of the metapsychological significance of anxiety and its protective operations: if in *Beyond* protection against extra-psychic danger became a structural obligation of the psychical apparatus, in *Inhibitions* the mechanisms of intrapsychic defense, and the entire array of neurotic illnesses connected with them, are now repositioned as a function of this obligation and of the immunitary dialectic that continues to structure anxiety's role in it.

To tease out these major developments, let's outline the salient parts of Freud's complex argument.[10]

Birth Trauma, Anxiety, and the Protective Shield

One fundamental revision in *Inhibitions* is the rejection of the hypothesis according to which anxiety is transformed libido. However, rather than replacing libido with an alternative source of which anxiety would be a derivation, Freud now adduces a different kind of explanation for its emergence. He proposes that the tumultuous experience of birth gives rise *directly* to the first feeling of anxiety, establishing an affective prototype of which all later anxiety states are in some degree a reproduction. It is a proposition that he had outlined briefly in some earlier texts, including the 1917 lecture, but without acknowledging that it didn't square with the old "economic" hypothesis.[11]

As is well known, in 1924 this idea had been taken up and developed in a certain direction by Freud's disciple Otto Rank in his provocative book *The Trauma of Birth*.[12] With direct reference to Freud's previous outlines, Rank theorized birth as an event of "primal anxiety" (*Urangst*), involving both "physiological" distress (constriction and dyspnea, which establish the somatic prototype for later anxiety states) and "psychical" distress" (loss of uterine bliss) (Rank, 1924/1929, p. 187). Resuscitating an old term dating from Freud's work with Breuer in the 1890s, Rank had proposed that birth thus constituted a trauma which the subject sought throughout life to "abreact," subsequent anxiety attacks and psychotherapy itself being major occasions for this affective disposal (Rank, 1924/1929, p. 17). Freud's previous remarks on anxiety and birth had always stopped short of describing the latter as a trauma. In the wake of Rank's book, Freud embraces the term; however, he sharply differentiates his conceptualization from Rank's. Rejecting the notion of abreaction—on the basis that it is unfeasible to regard subsequent anxiety attacks as cathartic disburdenings of *Urangst*—he brings forward another term dating from the Breuer period, the "mnemic symbol," to designate the relation between experiences of anxiety and the physiological distress of birth: the former are

"precipitates" of the latter which reproduce something of the original state without any cathartic function (Freud, 1926/2024k, p. 83 and n1). He also recasts birth within the newer framework of trauma devised in *Beyond*. That is, he characterizes the psychical perturbation of birth as an influx of exogenous excitation of such magnitude as to "penetrate" (Freud, 1926/2024k, p. 120; translation modified) or cause a "breaking through of the protective shield against stimuli" (p. 84)—a quantitative overwhelming of the system which, he tersely speculates, may be what instigates the primal repression constituting the nucleus of the unconscious itself.

Before looking in more detail at how Freud goes on to reconceptualize subsequent manifestations of anxiety, and their relationship to birth trauma, let us make two brief observations about his deployment of the protective shield in the second theory. For although the new framework retains this "bounded" model of self-protection from *Beyond*, it also introduces significant developments in respect of it.

First, there is the idea of the protective shield's originary failure. As we've seen, *Beyond* is concerned with contingent events of perilous energetic magnitude, in response to which the shield may or may not succeed as a barrier against traumatic fright. In *Inhibitions* birth is posited as a situation in which the shield is *inevitably and necessarily* breached by an influx of unmasterable external energy: traumatic "fright" becomes as it were the inaugural event of all mental life, without which the first repressions, and thus the basis for normative intrapsychic conflict, would never be activated. If subsequent traumas are capable of jamming the psychical apparatus, as per *Beyond*, the originary trauma of birth turns out to play an essential role in setting it in motion in the first place.

Secondly, and consequently, there's now at least an initial disarticulation between anxiety and the protective shield. In *Beyond*, Freud describes preparedness of anxiety as a dimension of the shield's own functioning. In *Inhibitions*, we learn that historically the subject only comes to know the affect of anxiety at all thanks to the effraction of the shield during birth. Presumably, then, at the neonatal stage imagined in the later text, the shield does not yet count anxiety among its mechanisms (though Freud stops short of offering any explicit redescription of it that would help clarify the new picture). Now, the precise relationship between, on the one hand, the mode of "hypercathectic" anxiety described as a feature of the shield in 1920 and, on the other, the originary event of anxiety at birth broached in 1926, remains an open question; Freud never retracts the account of *Angstbereitschaft* outlined in *Beyond*, but nor does he, in *Inhibitions* or anywhere else, evolve it or explicate its possible derivation from birth trauma. Instead, in *Inhibitions* it tacitly gives way to the theorization of signal anxiety (*Angstsignal*) as an entirely distinct modality of protective anxiety. As we'll see, not only is signal anxiety given an explicit lineage to the *Urangst* provoked by the originary effraction of the protective shield; its subsequent operation, in contrast to the preparatory anxiety of *Beyond*, is conceived as being wholly independent of the *Reizschutz*.

Automatic Anxiety

The revised theory of *Inhibitions* in fact divides manifestations of anxiety into two kinds: signal anxiety and automatic anxiety (*automatische Angst*). It is in the relationship

between them that the immunitary character of anxiety comes back into relief. Since from a developmental point of view automatic anxiety antedates the advent of signal anxiety, I'll consider the former first before returning to *Angstsignal* and the articulation of the one with the other.

Freud posits that automatic anxiety occurs "whenever a danger situation analogous to birth [has] established itself" (Freud, 1926/2024k, p. 143). By the phrase "danger situation analogous to birth" he means, very specifically, a circumstance involving an "economic disturbance" akin to that of birth (Freud, 1926/2024k, p. 122). We have seen that in *Inhibitions* birth is said to incur a traumatic breach in the protective shield by excessive energies from the outside. Analogous situations would be those that entail a comparable overwhelming of the subject by an excess of stimulation due to external circumstances, though the source of the energy in question may just as well be endogenous as exogenous. Thus a violent traumatic event—a further breach of the protective shield—such as Freud describes in *Beyond*, would be analogous; but so too would a situation where the continued absence of an infant's primary caregiver means that an inner need cannot be met and the internal tension due to the need reaches an insupportable level: the critical thing in each case is that external conditions leave the subject "helpless" (*hilflos*) in the face of a stimulation they are unable to master. In such circumstances birth anxiety is reproduced as a mnemic symbol of the original trauma—or rather, as Freud says in the reflexive voice, the affect "reproduce[s] itself [*Er reproduzierte sich*]," a purely reactive automatism independent of the will or control of the ego (Freud, 1926/2024k, p. 143). Significantly, this unregulated reproduction also involves a major difference. At birth the physiological correlates of the anxiety state are directly expedient: the arousal of the respiratory organs "prepar[es] the way for the activity of the lungs" and the acceleration of the heartbeat "help[s] to keep the blood free from toxic substances" (Freud, 1926/2024k, p. 119). Freud indicates that subsequent instances of automatic anxiety in young infants may also prove expedient, since the activation of the vocal and respiratory apparatus may alert the primary caregiver who can alleviate the child's needs; otherwise, however, automatic anxiety is severed from any essential expediency, tending rather to be "inexpedient" (Freud, 1926/2024k, p. 119), that is, not simply unpleasurable but detrimentally incapacitating, even constituting an "illness" in its own right (Freud, 1926/2024k, p. 143).

Now, the helplessness that gives rise to automatic anxiety is not one infelicitous experience among others. In the course of *Inhibitions* it will become established as *the* fundamental experience which the psychical apparatus must labor to prevent and which almost the entire gamut of neurotic symptoms will be characterized as the result of attempts to forestall. And it is specifically in respect to the external dangers that cause helplessness that the protective function of signal anxiety comes to the fore. Anxiety may be the pathological outcome of helplessness, but it turns out also—when deployed "in [the] mitigated form" of a signal (Freud, 1926/2024k, p. 147)—to be an indispensable prophylactic against it.

Signal Anxiety

If signal anxiety comes into operation at a later point developmentally than automatic anxiety—to which we are susceptible from the start—this is because it is not simply

reactive but *anticipatory* and as such presupposes certain advances in the functioning of the ego. First, it requires the ego to have "learned" a basic capacity to "foresee" danger situations from which helplessness is likely to result (Freud, 1926/2024k, p. 147). Second, it requires the ego to have developed a degree of control over the anxiety-affect, such that it can reproduce it on its own initiative: in the case of signal anxiety it doesn't just experience the affect passively, as with the automatic modality; foreseeing danger, the ego deliberately "subjects itself" to a controlled measure of anxiety, a release of unpleasure sufficient to trigger forms of advance defense intended to avert the danger (Freud, 1926/2024k, p. 143).

The fundamental distinction between signal anxiety and the *Angstbereitschaft* described in *Beyond* consists in the fact that the latter is itself a form of defense—the hypercathexis constituting a protective armor against external stimuli—whereas the former, while it is part of a "defensive process" (Freud, 1926/2024k, p. 129), possesses no defensive properties in its own right but serves rather as an alarm which activates mechanisms that are so possessed. So it is at least conceivable that in situations where a catastrophic external event presents a threat—one that is causally unrelated to any internal impulses of the subject—the ego might deploy an anxiety signal to activate that dimension of the protective shield that is *Angstbereitschaft*. However, Freud does not develop this theoretical possibility. His account of signal anxiety centers on situations where the defensive action entailed is directed against internal factors; that is, against inner impulses whose fulfillment the subject foresees as being perilously in conflict with the demands of the outside world.

What occurs in this context, Freud argues, is that the ego recognizes that carrying out the impulse may bring about a situation of danger. Paradigmatically, this is a danger involving loss of or separation from a loved object which would likely give rise to the "economic disturbance" of helplessness. The prototypical object, established in early infancy, is the mother who "satisfies [the child's] needs without delay" (Freud, 1926/2024k, p. 121): to lose her, or more specifically to lose *her love* (to incur her rejection or hostility), would be to lose the only means of assuaging those needs and thus discharging internal tensions. Other objects come to the fore in later developmental stages, but they remain rooted in the fundamental need for the mother's love. Thus in the phallic phase the prospect of the loss of the penis now takes on significance not only as an anatomical loss per se but chiefly relationally, insofar as castration, which would prevent the subject from "uniting" with the mother "in the act of copulation," equates to a "renewed separation" from her (Freud, 1926/2024k, p. 123). Still later, it is the loss of love of the superego that becomes significant, this being an internalized representative of the early parental agency. Anticipating that any such danger may occur in actuality, the ego's strategic response is to "vividly imagine" that it has *already done so* (Freud, 1926/2024k, p. 143). By means of this more or less controlled, proleptic simulation—akin to the way "a general shifts small figures about on a map before setting large bodies of his troops in motion" (Freud, 1933/2024m, p. 79)—the ego activates an attenuated reproduction of the anxiety first experienced in the situation of primal helplessness: birth. The unpleasure thus generated functions, in turn, as a motive force for what Freud calls "protective actions" (*Schutzhandlungen*) (Freud, 1926/2024k, p. 146) against the unwelcome

impulse, keeping it in check and therefore preventing the imagined helplessness—and thus a potentially pathological outbreak of automatic anxiety—from becoming a reality.

Before we specify these protective actions, we may note in passing that this model brings with it an important realignment of the categories of neurotic and realistic anxiety. Freud continues to use the first term to describe anxiety provoked by an internal stimulus (though of course it is no longer attached, as it is in the first theory, to any notion of transformed libido). However, rather than existing in opposition to realistic anxiety, neurotic anxiety is effectively repositioned as a subcategory of it. In the theory of *Inhibitions* there is no such thing as a purely internal danger: no demand on the part of the drives is "dangerous in itself"; it becomes so, and therefore becomes anxiogenic, "only inasmuch as it entails a real external danger" (or, in certain instances, danger from the external world's superegoic proxy) (Freud, 1926/2024k, p. 112). Thus, directly or indirectly, all anxiety in the final analysis is now of the realistic type; all anxiety—whether of the automatic or signal kind—is a response to exogenous peril.

What, then, are the protective actions that signal anxiety activates? They appear to include the normal operations—as Freud had recently set out in *The Ego and the Id*—by which the ego assumes "control" of drives: binding/integration, sublimation, modification of aims and so on (Freud, 1924/2024j, p. 50). However, they also include the whole repertoire of intrapsychic mechanisms by which the ego disowns and dynamically suppresses drives. Chief among these, of course, is repression itself, whose relationship to anxiety is thus completely inverted: where in the first theory repression gives rise to anxiety (by necessitating the transformation of libido) it is now anxiety that activates repression in order to protect the ego against a dangerous wish—and Freud even revisits his earlier case histories on phobia, "Little Hans" and the "Wolf Man," and revises his account of their pathogenesis accordingly. But he also sets out a series of other mechanisms that, he says, should now be subsumed, alongside repression, under the umbrella term of "defense" (Freud, 1926/2024k, p. 144): reaction-formation, isolation, undoing, and regression. "[P]articular illnesses," Freud suggests, may be connected to particular forms of defense: e.g., repression is connected with hysteria (including phobias), isolation with obsessional neurosis, etc. (Freud, 1926/2024k, p. 145). And *every* such form of defense, he now insists, requires an anxiety signal if it is to be triggered at all.

What determines the type of action deployed is only the quantitative intensity of the signal: the more attenuated is the anxiety that the ego manages to self-administer, the more likely is the resulting action to remain in the range of normal egoic operations. To be sure, even the defense mechanisms are imputed to possess a "normalizing" role in certain contexts: the repression of the Oedipus complex is preliminary to its total "dissolution" (Freud, 1933/2024m, p. 81 and n3); reaction-formations contribute to the construction of "what is known as 'character'" (e.g., the formation of traits like "cleanliness") (Freud, 1933/2024m, p. 80). It is striking nonetheless that Freud's account devotes most of its attention to situations where the outcome of the defense mechanisms activated is, rather, a symptom, whether hysterical or obsessional—striking because of what might easily appear to be a contradiction between the self-protective goal of the signal and the unpleasurable, even debilitating, pathology that may result from it. But Freud emphasizes that the distinction between normal psychical motions and pathogenic defenses is

really only a distinction between those protective actions that are wholly felicitous and those that are not. As infelicitous as a symptom may be, within the second theory it is always a function of the more fundamental imperative to "put an end to the danger situation" and "avoid the generating of [overwhelming] anxiety" (Freud, 1926/2024k, p. 129). The emphasis Freud places on the pathogenic outcomes of signal anxiety, in other words, is not in contradiction with the idea of anxiety's protective aspect. Rather, it is a renewed and expanded acknowledgement of the notion that the self-protection afforded by anxiety becomes detrimental in its own way when the anxiety is carried beyond a certain quantitative limit. Indeed, Freud also leaves room to repeat directly the point expressed in 1917 that where the attenuation of the signal somehow fails entirely, the subject suffers a full-blown anxiety attack, defensive measures being bypassed altogether. In such instances, he says, the ego effectively subjects itself to the very "unpleasure which the drive process was threatening to produce," the intended protective measure coinciding absolutely with the eventuality it was created to prevent (Freud, 1926/2024k, p. 129).

Immunitary Logic in *Inhibitions*: A Summation

The immunitary logic we have been tracking in Freud's metapsychology thus achieves its fullest and most far-reaching expression in the revised anxiety theory of *Inhibitions*.

For one thing, let us note, the anxiogenic dangers of the external world assume much greater significance here than ever before in his accounts of psychical life. On the one hand, their role in the etiology of the neuroses is substantially expanded. In *Beyond*, their role is connected exclusively to traumatic neurosis, other neurotic pathologies being generally conceived at this period in Freud's work as being actuated by internal danger, that is, by endogenous impulses which are intolerable to conscious thought and thus repressed. Freud's position in (and after) *Inhibitions* that any "drive situation which is feared goes back ultimately to an *external* situation of danger" (Freud, 1933/2024m, p. 79)—i.e., a drive is only dangerous on account of the real harm that its satisfaction may provoke from the external milieu—makes the menace of the outside world a sine qua non in traumatic *and* nontraumatic neuroses, albeit in different ways in each case. On the other hand, and correlatively, self-protection vis-à-vis the outside world now assumes a much more encompassing role in the characterization of the psychical apparatus as such, the latter's inner defenses against endogenous impulses being repositioned as a function of the need to forestall the damaging affective consequence of exogenous harm—or in some instances, to be sure, of the harm caused by the outer world's interiorized proxy.[13]

Furthermore, the aporetic structure characteristic of immunitary mechanisms is substantively extended in respect of intrapsychic functioning. As we saw above, when Freud introduced signal anxiety in 1917, he posited it as a discrete psychical action whose sole purpose was to activate motor responses: flight or physical defense. Now signal anxiety's protective function is no longer one psychical action among others. It has been repositioned as *the* action necessary to trigger an entire—and freshly expanded—array of other intrapsychic defenses. By the same token, each of these latter mechanisms finds

itself inscribed in a distinctly antinomic conceptual horizon. This is because, as we just noted, Freud now deems their ultimate raison d'être to be to forestall the affective consequence of exogenous harm, and this consequence is nothing other than the unlimited and overwhelming generation of anxiety. In short, a certain homeopathic logic now encompasses the full range of the ego's defenses—normal as well as pathogenic—with anxiety positioned as both the affective outcome they are designed to avert and, in diminished doses, the necessary "inoculation" needed to mobilize them at all (Freud, 1926/2024k, p. 143). The Freudian subject, we might say, has become an immunitary subject through and through.

To draw to a close our discussion of both *Inhibitions* and the larger theoretical trajectory we've traced towards it, it perhaps bears reemphasizing that the 1926 text represents Freud's last major innovation of the anxiety theory. In subsequent years its thesis will be reiterated in detail (Freud, 1933/2024m, pp. 72–84) and in outline (Freud, 1940/2024n, p. 179ff) and put to work in the late socio-cultural texts such as *Civilization and its Discontents*. But neither the model of anxiety arrived at in *Inhibitions*, nor the encompassing role the text gives to anxiety in respect of psychical functioning and external danger, is ever abandoned. Whatever the remaining variances in the anxiety theory—some elements of *Beyond* being, we have noted, incompletely integrated with developments in *Inhibitions*—the immunitary logic that characterizes it leaves an emphatic and durable mark on Freud's account of psychical life.

Conclusion

I want to conclude by underlining a few of the implications that follow from the argument I've been making, both for our understanding of the history of Freud's thinking and for the broader intellectual history of the affect of anxiety.

In respect of Freud's thinking specifically there are three things to underline. First, the conventional separation of the anxiety theory into two phases ("first" and "second"), while it remains important, should be supplemented by the recognition of another reorientation cutting across it, one in which Freud shifts towards an increasing emphasis on anxiety's supposedly self-protective functions. If successive details of the theory after this reorientation are not always fully harmonized with one another, the differences among them nonetheless belie a deeper kinship, a common root in a single epistemic horizon whose parameters have been tracked in complementary ways by Esposito and Cohen. Second, Esposito's own treatment of Freud stresses the immunitary character of his socio-cultural texts and their place in a lineage of other immunitary social theories. However, the developments examined here suggest that the immunitary dimensions of Freud's thought extend further than Esposito's work has so far indicated, that is, into the metapsychology, and so into the very conformation of the psychical apparatus as Freud conceives it. This extension is partly underpinned by an additional affiliation to distinctly modern constructions of life, external danger and organismic self-protection that first emerged in the life sciences in the late nineteenth century. These constructions can therefore be seen to inform the contours of the Freudian subject in both a literal (topographic) sense and in terms of its dynamic functioning. Third, though previous research has

recognized that Freud's early traumatic etiologies tacitly leaned on biological models of self-protection, the examination of the anxiety theory traced here indicates that this borrowing persisted long after the abandonment of those etiologies, becoming if anything more encompassing from 1917 onwards. This recognition opens up scope for further work tracing the implicit role of this borrowing in areas of Freud's doctrine other than the anxiety theory.

The broader intellectual history of anxiety has been the focus of important scholarly attention recently. A genealogy of mainly medical thinking on anxiety has been traced by Horwitz (2013) and a modern philosophical genealogy by Bergo (2021), Freud taking a key place in both. This article has tried to suggest that the psychoanalytic innovations Freud brings to these intersecting traditions are themselves inscribed in another, more heterogeneous genealogy of thought in which the concept of protection, and the precarious thresholds that distinguish protection from menace, is the central concern. It therefore poses the question of how the legacy of this inscription plays out in anxiety theories that follow and respond to Freud. Central to such a legacy, though by no means exclusive to it, is the ongoing and as yet unwritten, history of post-Freudian psychoanalytic reflection on anxiety. The vicissitudes of this reflection are complex, and differences of opinion among key thinkers and traditions are marked. But I suggest in closing that if there's a consistent thread underpinning these vicissitudes, it is a continued recognition of the same fundamental antinomy within anxiety which Freud first sought to conceptualize in immunitary terms: its capacity both to protect *and* harm us, to stabilize *and* destabilize us—to regulate *and* overwhelm psychical life itself.

Acknowledgments

I am grateful to Sam Durrant, Ian Fairley, Denis Flannery, Lucy Frank, Anna Madill, Anuradha Menon, Brendon Nicholls, Dan O'Gorman, Jay Prosser, Ross Truscott, and David Wylot, who have all made helpful suggestions on parts of this work in draft and/or discussed with me ideas connected to it.

ORCID iD

Nicholas Ray https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2184-2111

Funding

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Notes

1. Note that before being adopted into the bioscientific lexicon "immunity" was already a juridico-political category (Cohen, 2009, pp. 40–45).

2. Since Esposito's work on immunity is frequently compared with Jacques Derrida's on autoimmunity (e.g., Mutsaers, 2016; Neocleous, 2022), and since Derrida speaks more than once about psychoanalysis in connection with autoimmunity (Derrida, 2000/2002b, p. 242; 2003/2005, p. 55), a clarification about the orientation of the present essay is in order. In Derrida's work—from *Specters of Marx* onwards—"autoimmunity" refers to the principle that absolute closure to alterity is incompatible with survival. A self-identical being must be capable of closing itself protectively against exogenous dangers, but to survive at all it must also "protect itself against its own protection, its own power of rejection, […] which is to say, against its own immunity" (Derrida, 1996/2002a, p. 80). An "autoimmune" opening to otherness, to the improper, is therefore paradoxically structural to the viability of any supposedly "proper" self, even if it comes to be disavowed by the self that it marks. Hence, as Michael Naas (2006, p. 23) puts it, "autoimmunity" in Derrida refers not simply to a compromising of "the life of some self-identical being" but to a compromising of "the very being or unity of self-identity." "Autoimmunity" is thus essentially "another name […] for […] 'deconstruction,'" or for the auto-deconstruction which is always at work in "self-identity" and which can be rendered legible by deconstructive reading (Naas, 2006, p. 18). With close attention to anxiety theory, Samuel Weber (2011; 2021) has already examined the operation of autoimmunity —in this specific, deconstructive sense—in Freud's work. My focus in this essay is different, even if it trenches on proximate concerns. Derrida's autoimmunity is, as Weber (2011, p. 10) points out, "a structural tendency of every organised system." I am not primarily concerned with tracing in Freud's metapsychology a structural operation that is at work by default in every system or system of thought. I am trying to show how Freudian metapsychology is shaped by the specific conceptual forces and resources of the idea of immunitary protection per se—an idea whose origins aren't exclusive to the life sciences but which do have a certain historicity, and which the life sciences began articulating with a particular explicitness, coherence and authority at a determinable moment in their evolution. Inasmuch as Derrida's notion of "autoimmunity" is partly drawn from "the domain of biology" (Derrida, 1996/2002a, p. 80 n.27) one could say that, though it names a structural tendency of every system, its own theorization too takes shape within the contingent horizon opened up by this articulation. In any case, it's in relation to this particular epistemic horizon that the present article tracks the vicissitudes of Freud's thinking on anxiety.
3. For a fuller discussion, see Laplanche (1980/2006, p. 21ff).
4. At this stage, Freud remains committed to the opposition between self-preservation and sexuality; hence, anxiety's supposed derivation from libido is consistent with the capacity of anxiety—like sexual desire—to work against the interests of self-preservation.
5. Readers of the old *Standard Edition* will be more used to the term "preparedness for anxiety," with which Strachey translated *Angstbereitschaft*. This is a misleading translation because it makes anxiety merely the eventuality for which the subject prepares herself, whereas Freud's claim is that the subject deploys anxiety to prepare herself against danger. The *Revised Standard Edition* captures Freud's meaning better with "preparedness of anxiety." It should also be noted that in 1917 Freud had briefly used the term *Angstbereitschaft* to encompass *both* modalities of protective anxiety. However, in *Beyond* he uses it exclusively in reference to protection against fright, and in *Inhibitions*, he never uses it in connection with signal anxiety.

6. Freud's editors remark that what Freud elsewhere regards as "anxiety as a reaction to a traumatic situation [is] probably equivalent to what is here called *Schreck*" (Freud, 1920/2024i, p. 13n.). They are alluding to the designation of "automatic anxiety" which Freud will formulate subsequently in *Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety* and which, along with *Angstentwicklung*, ends up absorbing the concept of fright into it entirely.
7. Freud does speculate that the sense organs located "immediately beneath" the membrane, which directly benefit from its filtration, may also operate periodic remissions in their receptivity, taking in only intermittent "samples" of the outer world that are sufficient for the organism to orient itself. If so, he suggests, the normal exercise of perception, in potentially all sentient beings, might itself constitute a further means of safely modulating incoming energy, but, he stresses, "by a quite different path [*ein andere Weg*]" (Freud, 1920/2024i, p. 28; translation modified).
8. Weber's (2021) Derridean/autoimmunitary reading also notes a potential differentiation between the death of the vesicle's outer layer as a "condition of survival" and the conflict between life and death that emerges at the level of the drives (Weber, 2021, p. 118). Earlie suggests that the very trope of autoimmunity in Derrida's work may be "rooted" in his remarks on the vesicle in *The Post Card* (Earlie, 2021, p. 165).
9. We should acknowledge that another mode of defense directed to external reality also develops in this period following *The Ego and the Id*, namely, "disavowal" (*Verleugnung*)—though it remains for a long time directed almost exclusively to the perception of anatomical sex distinction, the scope of its action only broadening beyond this in the very last stage of Freud's work (Freud, 1940/2024n).
10. After *Inhibitions*, Freud's other substantive text on anxiety is Lecture 32 of *New Introductory Lectures* (Freud, 1933/2024m). Since this largely recapitulates the claims in *Inhibitions* without evolving any significant new propositions, I have not devoted a separate section to it; however, I occasionally quote it in my discussion of *Inhibitions*.
11. Freud first posited the idea in 1909 in a note added to the second edition of *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900/2024b, p. 35 n2). He resumed it briefly in 1910/2024e (p. 160); 1917/2024g (p. 351); 1924/2024j (p. 52).
12. So provocative was Rank's text that it led to his ostracization from Freud's inner circle. Having initially welcomed it, Freud eventually determined that Rank's position undermined psychoanalytic doctrine by displacing the centrality of Oedipus, castration, and the father. *Inhibitions* is, as much as anything, his reaffirmation of their significance and a rebuke to Rank. See Breger (2000, pp. 310–37).
13. It is perhaps unsurprising too, given this overarching intensification of the significance of external danger, that Freud should not only retain the concept of the *Reizschutz*, the "boundary" whose maintenance facilitates psychic health, but also bestow on it a new connection to the traumatic inauguration of mental life per se.

References

Bergo, B. (2021). *Anxiety: A philosophical history*. Oxford University Press.

Breger, L. (2000). *Freud: Darkness in the midst of vision*. Wiley.

Cohen, E. (2008). Immune communities, common immunities. *Social Text*, 26(1), 94–114. https://doi.org/10.1215/01642472-2007-021

Cohen, E. (2009). *A body worth defending: Immunity, biopolitics, and the apotheosis of the modern body*. Duke University Press.

Derrida, J. (1987). *The postcard: From Socrates to Freud and beyond* (A. Bass, Trans.). University of Chicago Press. (Original work published 1980)

Derrida, J. (2002a). Faith and knowledge: The two sources of "religion" at the limits of reason alone (S. Weber, Trans.). In G. Anidjar (Ed.) *Acts of religion* (pp. 40–101). Routledge. (Original work published 1996)

Derrida, J. (2002b). Psychoanalysis searches the states of its soul. In *Without alibi* (P. Kamuf, Trans) (pp. 238–280). Stanford University Press. (Original work published 2000)

Derrida, J. (2005). *Rogues* (P.-A. Brault & M. Naas, Trans.). Stanford University Press. (Original work published 2003)

Earlie, P. (2021). *Derrida and the legacy of psychoanalysis*. Oxford University Press.

Esposito, R. (2006). Interview with Timothy Campbell. *Diacritics*, 36(2), 49–56. https://doi.org/10.1353/dia.2008.0010

Esposito, R. (2008). *Bios: Biopolitics and philosophy* (T. Campbell, Trans.). University of Minnesota Press. (Original work published 2004)

Esposito, R. (2010). *Communitas: The origin and destiny of community* (T. Campbell, Trans.). Stanford University Press. (Original work published 1998)

Esposito, R. (2011). *Immunitas: The protection and negation of life* (Z. Hanafi, Trans.). Polity. (Original work published 2002)

Esposito, R. (2013). *Terms of the political* (R. Noel Welch, Trans.). Fordham. (Original work published 2008)

Esposito, R. (2020). The twofold face of immunity. *Crisis & Critique*, 7(3), 72–79.

Freud, S. (1999). *Gesammelte werke* [Collected works]. Fischer. 18 vols.

Freud, S. (2024a). On the grounds for detaching a particular syndrome from neurasthenia under the description "anxiety neurosis." In *Revised standard edition of the complete psychological works of Sigmund Freud [RSE]* (J. Strachey & M. Solms, Trans.) 3: (pp. 78–103). Rowman & Littlefield. (Original work published 1895)

Freud, S. (2024b). *The interpretation of dreams*. *RSE*, v. 4 & 5. (Original work published 1900)

Freud, S. (2024c). *Three essays on the theory of sexuality*. *RSE*, 7, 110–218. (Original work published 1905)

Freud, S. (2024d). Analysis of a phobia in a five-year-old boy. *RSE*, 10, 2–113. (Original work published 1909)

Freud, S. (2024e). A special type of choice of object made by men. *RSE*, 11, 165–174. (Original work published 1910)

Freud, S. (2024f). Repression. *RSE*, 14, 126–139. (Original work published 1915)

Freud, S. (2024g). *Introductory lectures on psychoanalysis*. *RSE* v. 15 & 16. (Original work published 1917)

Freud, S. (2024h). From the history of an infantile neurosis. *RSE* 17: 2-109. (Original work published 1918[1914])

Freud, S. (2024i). *Beyond the pleasure principle*. *RSE* 18: 2-62. (Original work published 1920)

Freud, S. (2024j). *The ego and the id*. *RSE* 19: 2-58. (Original work published 1924)

Freud, S. (2024k). *Inhibitions, symptoms and anxiety*. *RSE* 20: 68-156. (Original work published 1926)

Freud, S. (2024l). *Civilization and its discontents*. *RSE* 21: 54-132. (Original work published 1930)
Freud, S. (2024m). *New introductory lectures on psychoanalysis*. *RSE* v. 22. (Original work published 1933)
Freud, S. (2024n). *Outline of psychoanalysis*. *RSE* 23: 126-188. (Original work published 1940)
Freud, S. (2024o). Extracts from the Fliess papers. *RSE* 1: 202-307. (Original work published 1950[1892-99])
Freud, S. (2024p). Project for a scientific psychology. *RSE* 1: 308-421. (Original work published 1950[1895])
Freud, S., & Breuer, J. (2024). *Studies on hysteria. RSE* v. 2. (Original work published 1895)
Horwitz, A. (2013). *Anxiety: A short history*. Johns Hopkins.
Laplanche, J. (2006). *Problématiques I: L'angoisse* [Problematics vol. 1: Anxiety]. PUF. (Original work published 1980)
Laplanche, J., & Pontalis, J-B. (1973). *The language of psychoanalysis* (D. Nicholson-Smith, Trans). Karnac. (Original work published 1967)
Macmillan, M. (1991). *Freud evaluated: The complete arc*. Elsevier.
Makari, G. (2008). *Revolution in mind: The creation of psychoanalysis*. Melbourne University Press.
Mutsaers, I. (2016). *Immunological discourse in political philosophy*. Routledge.
Naas, M. (2006). "One nation…indivisible": Jacques Derrida on the autoimmunity of democracy and of god. *Research in Phenomenology*, 36(1), 15–44. https://doi.org/10.1163/156916406779165818
Neocleous, M. (2022). *The politics of immunity: Security and the policing of bodies*. Verso.
Quinodoz, J-P. (2005). *Reading Freud* (D. Alcorn, Trans.). Routledge. (Original work published 2004)
Rank, O. (1929). *Trauma of birth*. Kegan Paul & Co. (Original work published 1924)
Weber, S. (2011). Sidestepping: "Freud after Derrida". *Mosaic*, 44(3), 1–14. https://doi.org/10.1353/mos.2011.a450726
Weber, S. (2021). *Singularities: Politics and poetics*. University of Minnesota Press.

Author Biography

Nicholas Ray is an Associate Professor in the School of English at the University of Leeds, UK.