

Pleasure and Anxiety: An Important Mistranslation

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In 1988, Crist discussed the English translation of some original German terms for orgonomic concepts that were used by Wilhelm Reich. He pointed out that these were actually mistranslations that had their origin in even earlier translations of the German language that was used to first describe the new discipline of psychoanalysis. Bruno Bettelheim (1984) wrote:

The English translations of Freud's writings are seriously defective in important respects and have led to erroneous conclusions, not only about Freud the man, but also about psychoanalysis. The number of inadequacies and downright errors in the translation is enormous; merely to correct the more blatant ones would be a tremendous task (page 5)

For Bettelheim, the English mistranslation of the terms Freud used to set forth psychoanalysis transformed the humanistic, emotional view of its author into a "depersonalized, abstract, mechanistic" theory. His observations on the misuse of words in psychoanalysis are equally important for the science of orgonomy.

This article concentrates on a single mistranslation which is basic to the understanding and full emotional impact of one of Reich's most fundamental orgonomic discoveries. The words "pleasure" and "anxiety," as used in his original German work, are *Lust* and *Angst* (Reich, 1933a, page 449). These terms refer to two primary emotions. When they were translated into English by Theodore Wolfe (Reich, 1933b, page 309) as "pleasure" and "anxiety," Reich continued to use them when he began to write in English. It appears that Wolfe transposed these errors directly from the English words that had been used to translate psychoanalytic terminology: the *Schaulust* of

Freud was translated into “scopophilia” by Freuds’s translators and corrected as the “sexual pleasure in looking” by Bettelheim himself (1984, page 90) and Freud’s *Lust- Unlus-Prinzip* into the “pleasure-unpleasure principle” of the English version.

In 1988, Crist proposed a new translation to describe the basic emotional antithesis of *Lust* and *Angst* as “desire” and “fear.” The natural English translation of *Lust*, from the Indo-European root “las” for “desire” (*The American Heritage Dictionary*, page 2111) is “lust,” which means sexual desire. Unfortunately, this word has taken on a negative, lascivious connotation in the English language.

The etymological origin of the word “desire,” on the other hand, means literally “to stop contemplating stars for religious meanings,” from the Latin “de-sidus, sider-” (Ibid, page 506). It suggests, if not infers, that desire has its roots in religious experience. The act of refraining from religious contemplation, which arises from distorted ocular function, automatically allows desire to be felt. However, it is not known if by this the Latin meaning was sexual desire. Today the word “desire” has a more direct impact on us, both emotionally and sensually, than the word “pleasure.”

The word “pleasure,” from the Indo-European root “plak-” for “to be flat, to be calm” (Ibid, page 2120), is too dull to describe such a strong drive that determines so much of mankind’s thinking and behavior.

Oral desire characterizes the primary interest in infancy and early childhood and genital desire develops in later childhood (ages 4–5 years) and again at puberty. “Desire” moves newborns to seek ocular and oral contact, and if this function is frustrated, a block will result and have a long-lasting effect on all functioning throughout life.

These examples clearly demonstrate the inner, stronger impact, indeed a quite different connotation, of the word “desire” as compared to the milder “pleasure.”

On the other side of the antithesis, comparing the translation of *Angst* as “anxiety,” *Angst* has an etymologically different root than “fear.” “Fear” originates from the Old German “feraz” and the Old

English “faer” for “danger” (Ibid, page 2119) and is emotionally more intense and primitive than anxiety. The German *Angst* and the English “anxiety” both come from the Latin “angere” for “to strangle” and “angustus” for “narrow” from the Indo-European root “angh-” for “painfully constricted” (Ibid, page 2095). As with “lust,” the word “anxiety” has acquired a different and duller meaning over the course of time. The more primitive and intense quality of *Angst* describes both fear and anxiety and the meaning must be revealed by the context. In the context of primitive emotions, “anxiety,” appears to be too dull compared to “fear.” This distinction was not made by Wolfe, who limited himself to the known psychoanalytic translation (Freud, 1895, pages 50–66).

Faced with mechanical or chemical stimuli, an ameba “out of fear,” not anxiety, will immediately contract its pseudopods. A menaced vorticella, a unicellular organism that lives attached to a thread, will coil up its stalk. These functions, and countless others that occur in nature, are best described by the word “fear,” which conveys the life-threatening quality not present in “anxiety.”

To read and understand Reich with just such a revised translation of these two terms- pleasure and anxiety-conveys a much different meaning, one of more energy and immediacy. It also matches what is observed in nature.

Wilhelm Reich, possibly more so than other natural scientists, requires the most accurate translation. This is necessary for all his early work, before he began to write in English. Reich’s discoveries center on energy, specifically orgone energy, and every modification of his original writings has the very real potential to distort the truth of his findings and allow for misinterpretation. It is hoped that future historical scholars will further clarify Reich’s early writings and help place the science of orgonomy on as accurate a footing as is possible.

References

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