

# [How to understand a world of opposites philosophy essay](https://assignbuster.com/how-to-understand-a-world-of-opposites-philosophy-essay/)

Our world was built upon and maintained on the idea of polar opposites for everything: male and female; night and day; good and evil; and pleasure and pain. Our lives are essentially just a hybrid of opposites, where we struggle to maintain an equivalent balance between the two forces. At times we find ourselves perhaps faltering towards one side too much, where we quickly try to rebalance the forces within us. Interestingly enough, most of life as we know it is dependent on the pain and pleasure concept, where the pain of one action can actually increase the pleasure of the resulting reaction.

In Freud’s essay, “ The Uncanny” he combines aesthetics and psychoanalysis to explain The Uncanny. He says that it is something fearful and frightening and that human life as a fusion of happiness and sorrow, and as such it has been neglected in the history of aesthetics. To explain The Uncanny, Freud breaks down the semantics of the word into two German words, heimlich and unheimlich. “ The word Heimlich embodies the dialectic of ‘ privacy’ and ‘ intimacy’ that is inherent in bourgeois ideology.”[1]He delves further into it by explaining how the words heimlich and unheimlich are actually polar opposites as well as he is quoted,

“ What interests us most in this long extract is to find that among its different shades of meaning the word ‘ heimlich’ exhibits one which is identical with its opposite, ‘ unheimlich’. What is heimlich thus comes to be unheimlich. In general we are reminded that the word ‘ heimlich’ is not unambiguous, but belongs to two sets of ideas, which, without being contradictory, are yet very different: on the one hand it means what is familiar and agreeable, and on the other, what is concealed and kept out of sight. ‘ Unheimlich’ is customarily used, we are told, as the contrary only of the first signification of ‘ heimlich’, and not of the second. Sanders tells us nothing concerning a possible genetic connection between these two meanings of heimlich. On the other hand, we notice that Schelling says something which throws quite a new light on the concept of the Unheimlich, for which we were certainly not prepared. According to him, everything is unheimlich that ought to have remained secret and hidden but has come to light.”[2]

Peeling back the layers of his definition, it is evident to see how an uncanny experience can evoke both pleasure and pain. A pleasant experience is one that is familiar and agreeable, or the heimlich, and also a minimization of painful experiences. According to our definition the uncanny is that which is unfamiliar on the grounds that it is too familiar, thereby explaining how it is a fusion of the pain and pleasure principle. The pleasure is based on the feeling of familiarity while the pain comes from the confusion and fright of it being too familiar.

In Blanchot’s work, The Infinite Conversation, he also describes the fusion of pleasure and pain into human life as he says,

“ Historical man is bound up with the myths of heroic times insofar as he sometimes affirms himself by combating them, at other times by identifying with them. In originary time (the time of prehistory) there are no heroes; man is without a name, without a visage. He belongs to living nature and lives in the pleasure and pain of the earth. The mythical hero already has a name and a genealogy; he no longer takes pleasure in nature, he wants to conquer it…”[3]

From this quote its clear how man is tied to both the pleasures and pains of this earth. Similarly in the Bible when Adam eats from the Tree of Knowledge, he is punished by :

“ The soil will be cursed because of you. In sorrow you shall eat from it all the days of your life. It will grow thorns and thistles for you; and you will eat the herbs of the field. By the sweat of your face you will eat bread …”[4]

From the creation of man the pleasure and pain principle was inherent as Adam was forced to work the fields as a punishment for eating the forbidden fruit, which causes physical pain and in return he would have food to eat which is the pleasurable aspect. Many times we appreciate things only after a great deal of despair or struggle to attain them; likewise the pain of sowing the fields, or earning an income, magnifies the effect and pleasure of being able to purchase physical goods we desire. Similarly the balance between male and female is included in the pleasure and pain principle as women endure it also. They must go through what is described as the most painful experience possible in a lifetime, childbirth, to achieve one of the greatest joys possible, parenthood. Many believe this pain was as direct result of Eve eating from the Tree of Knowledge as well as it says:

“ To the woman He said, I will greatly increase your sorrow and your pregnancy. You will give birth to children with pain. Your desire will be for your husband, and he will dominate you.”[5]

Although an opinionated view, there is no doubt that childbirth and parenthood are one of the strongest examples of a fusion of pain and pleasure in our world. Another key point is that the pain is carried and endured throughout the entire pregnancy period; amplifying the ecstatic joy when a woman is finally able to rid herself of the pain and simultaneously deriving the benefit and pleasure of now caring for and raising the child she carried with herself for nine months.

In The Infinite Conversation, Blanchot describes what he believes to be life and our vision of the world as quoted,

“ The man of the world lives in nuance and by degrees, he lives in a mixture of light and shadow, in confused enchantment or irresolute mediocrity: in the middle. Tragic man lies in the extreme tension between contraries, going from a yes and no confusedly merged back to a yes and a no that are clear and clearly preserved in their opposition. He does not see man a passable mixture of middling qualities and honest failings, but as an unendurable meeting of extreme grandeur and extreme destitution, and incongruous nothingness in which the two infinities collide.”[6]

From this quote we see the fusion of two polar opposites that shape our lives. The Chinese refer to this fusion as the concept of yin and yang. This concept describes how polar forces are interconnected and inter-reliant in the natural world, and how they give rise to each other in the natural world. Yin and yang are opposites that together form a stronger whole, similar to the heimlich and unheimlich, and although one may rise above the other at some point, they will always eventually balance out. This concept directly applies to the pleasure and pain principle in that they both work together to form a stronger whole and they are mutually reliant.

Another key internal struggle is between what we want and what we should want. Freud explains this internal conflict as the battle between the Id and the Superego. The Id is the set of uncoordinated instinctual tendencies; the ego is the controlled, pragmatic part; and the super-ego plays the role of the police to stop unacceptable desires. Naturally according to Freudian psychology, the Id wants to maximize pleasure however it requires the Superego to cause the pain, in order for the Ego to maintain a balance between the two. The pleasure-pain principle was established by Freud; however we see the roots of it in Aristotle’s “ Rhetoric” as he says,

“ We may lay it down that Pleasure is a movement, a movement by which the soul as a whole is consciously brought into its normal state of being; and that Pain is the opposite.”[7]

The pleasure principle is based on the idea that life is to be lived to the full and pleasure sought as a primary goal. This is explained as the Id within a person’s subconscious. Pain can be more immediate than pleasure, leading us to become more concerned with avoidance of pain and therefore paying more attention to it. The Superego operates by forcing us to feel that pain in order to counteract the psychotic pleasure chasing principles of the Id. When pleasure and pain occur together, a certain amount of confusion may occur, which itself may be pleasant or painful and hence determine what happens. The role of the Ego is to balance out the two equally destructive internal forces. Pain and pleasure can also be applied to explain a deeper meaning between two basic physics concepts, push and pull. The push principle is based on the fact of forcing someone to do something, whether they want to or not, and they obey. The person will feel obligated to obey even though it may be against his better judgment. This is just an extrapolation of the Superego or the pain principle as you will experience the pain even though it’s against your better judgment. The pull principle is based on leading someone where they choose to act. It is a sort of motivation technique where you would sell an idea to someone, where the push principle is based on brute force or intimidation to make someone obey you. The pull principle is addition to Freud’s Id, or the pleasure principle.

The push-pull principle is very similar to B. F. Skinner’s operant conditioning method. This method emphasized positive reinforcement, such as a reward to a positive behavior, in order to strengthen that behavior; as opposed to positive punishment, with physical or psychological pain, a negative behavior to cause that behavior to cease. The push-pull principle is based on these procedures as the push principle stresses positive punishment to force the subject to obey which is synonymous with the pain principle. Subsequently the pull principle emphasizes positive reinforcement to achieve the desired response from the subject, which is the goal of the pleasure principle.

In Freud’s essay, “ Beyond the Pleasure Principle” he makes a major modification to his previous theoretical approach. Before this essay, Freud was believed to have placed the sexual instinct, Eros, in explaining the focal force which drives our actions. In 1920, he went past the simple pleasure principle, and developed his theory of drives, by adding the death instinct, often referred to as “ Thanatos,” although he never used this term. His new theory is the basis for the pleasure and pain principle. The main importance of the essay exists in the striking picture of human being, struggling between two opposing instincts or drives: Eros (pleasure principle, Id) working for harmony, sexual connection, and self-preservation; Thanatos (pain principle, Superego) for repetition, aggression, and compulsion. Freud explains the pleasure as,

“ The pleasure principle long persists, however, as the method of working employed by the sexual instincts, which are so hard to ‘ educate’, and, starting from those instincts, or in the ego itself, if often succeeds in overcoming the reality principle, to the detriment of the organism as a whole.”[8]

Freud proposed his new theory, stating that humans are driven by two conflicting central desires: the life drive and the death drive. The life drive is concerned with preserving life by seeking pleasure and avoiding pain. Contrastingly, the death drive is the instinctual desire in all living things to return to a lower state that existed before we were born. Freud reasons that all living organisms want to be dead because theoretically we were all dead before we were alive. He explains this by,

“ It would be in contradiction to the conservative nature of the instincts if the goal of life were a state of things which had never yet been attained. On the contrary, it must be an old state of things, an initial state from which the living entity has at one time or other departed and to which it is striving to return by the circuitous paths along which its development leads. If we are to take it as a truth that knows no exception that everything living dies for internal reasons – becomes inorganic once again – then we shall be compelled to say that ‘ the aim of all life is death’ and, looking backwards, that ‘ inanimate things existed before living ones’.”[9]

Freud explains how human try to balance the death drive and the life drive by the role of the Ego. This is identical to the delicate balance of yin and yang that Chinese philosophers had said centuries beforehand. Freud says,

“ The upshot of our enquiry so far has been the drawing of a sharp distinction between the ‘ ego-instincts’ and the sexual instincts, and the view that the former exercise pressure towards death and the latter towards a prolongation of life.”[10]

The prolongation of life is linked to the pleasure principle and the pressure towards death is the pain principle. Life is a constant struggle to combine the two and maintain equilibrium. The Ego is the moderator between the two magnets: Id and Superego. He makes it apparent that the pleasure and pain simultaneously affect each other and need each other equally.

“ It is clear that the greater part of what is re-experienced under the compulsion to repeat must cause the ego unpleasure, since it brings to light activities of repressed instinctual impulses. That, however, is unpleasure of a kind we have already considered and does not contradict the pleasure principle: unpleasure for one system and simultaneously satisfaction for the other. ”[11]

Many of Georges Bataille’s literary works also carry the pleasure and pain principles. For instance, the plot of My Mother is based on the forbidden love between Hélène and Pierre. The incestuous relationship is a direct example of our theme as the love between the two represents the pleasure, while the guilt surrounding the relationship represents the pain. Together these opposing forces are battling throughout the book when the climax of the pleasure is reached; it is followed by the corresponding nadir where Hélène commits suicide. Interestingly enough in the final moments as mother and son are conceding to their desires, Hélène makes a large gash on her stomach causing a great amount of pain. However she knew that the pain would be followed up by an ecstasy of pleasure. Similarly Pierre is subjected to tremendous mental pain and anguish throughout the story because he is in love with his mother; however she doesn’t seem to reciprocate the same feelings. She even attempts to take his focus off her by abandoning him and forcing him to find a girlfriend. Clearly pain and pleasure are two of the main themes throughout the book. In another of Bataille’s works, Madame Edwarda, he continues with the pleasure-pain principle as he is quoted,

“ I invite the reader of this preface to turn his thoughts for a moment to the attitude traditionally observed towards pleasure (which , in sexual play, attains, a wild intensity, an insanity) and towards pain (finally assuaged by death, of course, but which , before that, dying winds to the highest pitch). A combination of conditions leads us to entertain a picture of mankind as it ought to be…”[12]

Bataille is explaining how combining both pleasure and pain is what the life of a man is based upon. An interesting note about Bataille is that he wrote Madame Edwarda using the pseudonym, Pierre Angélique. Pierre also happens to be the name of the main character in his other book, My Mother, where he suffers from an Oedipal complex.

Our world is built upon the fusion of opposites going back and forth until they harmonize. One of the main battles is between pleasure and pain, and we all struggle to deal with it internally. Freud writes that they are actually the same thing and he ties it his essay “ The Uncanny” or Unheimlich. He later uses the same ideology to further develop his three part structural model of the psyche to form his Life Drive and Death Drive theory. Maurice Blanchot writes in The Infinite Conversation, how mankind is a fusion of both principles. The greatest pleasures are only experienced after great pain such as childbirth, where the joy of motherhood as well as no longer experiencing the pain of pregnancy fuse to form an apex of pleasure that few can ever reach. Similarly sexual intercourse at first for women is tremendously painful however after the initial pain, a whole new world of pleasure and satisfaction is opened up to them. Life as we know it is simply mastering the struggle between the opposing forces.