

AIM OF THE INSTINCT

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November 10, 2025

RECOMMENDED CITATION

mohammad looti (2025). *AIM OF THE INSTINCT*. PSYCHOLOGICAL SCALES. Retrieved from <https://scales.arabpsychology.com/?p=69265>

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Primary Disciplinary Field(s): Psychoanalysis; Drive Theory; General Psychology

1. Core Definition

The **Aim of the Instinct** (or *Instinctual Aim*, translated from the German *Triebziel*) constitutes one of the four essential components by which Sigmund Freud formalized the concept of instinct or drive (*Trieb*) within his foundational theory of psychoanalysis. Fundamentally, the aim refers to the specific action, set of behaviors, or condition that, when achieved, results in the complete or partial satisfaction of the instinct. This satisfaction is intrinsically linked to the central psychoanalytic principle that all instincts generate a state of psychic tension, and the primary goal of the mental apparatus is to discharge this tension, thereby restoring a state of equilibrium or reducing internal discomfort. Consequently, the aim is defined by the outcome--the cessation of the excitation state at the source of the instinct.

Unlike the instinct's **Source** (the bodily need, such as an empty stomach) or its **Object** (the external item or person used to achieve satisfaction, such as food), the aim is purely functional. It describes the effective action taken. If the instinct is hunger, the source is the gastrointestinal tract in a state of depletion, the object might be a piece of bread, but the aim is the act of **eating and ingesting**, which achieves the necessary internal change (satiation) that neutralizes the internal drive stimulus. Freud emphasized that the aim is the only constituent of the instinct that is truly immutable in its core function; while the object used to achieve satisfaction can be highly varied and substituted (a concept critical for understanding sublimation and transference), the definitive action required to achieve tension reduction remains constant for that specific drive.

In the context of the pleasure principle, the successful achievement of the instinctual aim is experienced as pleasure, while the accumulation or failure to discharge the associated tension is experienced as displeasure or distress. This mechanism establishes the motivational bedrock of psychic life, driving the organism to interact with its environment in ways that repeatedly seek discharge. The aim thus serves as the crucial link between the physiological demands arising from the body and the psychological processes attempting to mediate those demands within the reality constraint of the external world.

2. Etymology and Historical Development

The formal conceptualization of the Aim of the Instinct was solidified by **Sigmund Freud** in his seminal 1915 metapsychological paper, "Instincts and Their Vicissitudes." This paper systematically elaborated on the concept of *Trieb* (drive), distinguishing it clearly from the simpler biological notion of *Instinkt* (instinct) common in zoology. Prior to 1915, Freud had discussed

instinctual urges, but the structured framework defining the four essential components--Source, Impetus, Object, and Aim--provided the necessary analytic rigor for the nascent science of psychoanalysis. This structure ensured that drives could be analyzed not just based on their origins, but on their final, observable, psychological goals.

Freud recognized that the human drive system was inherently plastic and flexible, particularly concerning the object chosen for discharge. However, he needed a criterion to define the ultimate goal of the drive, regardless of the route taken. The aim provided this criterion: it is the functional satisfaction. Early formulations related the aim closely to the transformation of quantity (energy or tension) into quality (experience of pleasure/unpleasure). The historical importance of defining the aim lies in its role in explaining instinctual modifications, particularly **sublimation**. If the original aim of a drive (e.g., aggression, whose aim is destruction) is deemed unacceptable by the ego or superego, the psychic energy is redirected toward a socially acceptable aim (e.g., competitive sports or critical intellectual work). The energy remains the same, but the functional goal changes under the influence of the reality principle, demonstrating the fluidity of the aim in human development despite the constancy of the drive's inherent pressure.

Subsequent modifications by post-Freudian theorists, while altering aspects of drive theory (such as the shift toward ego psychology or object relations theory), generally retained the structural distinction of the instinctual components. The concept of the aim remains central because it underpins the understanding of psychopathology, where conflicts often arise not just from the presence of a drive, but from the inability to achieve a satisfactory or socially sanctioned aim, leading to compromise formations, symptomatic behaviors, and neuroses.

3. Key Characteristics

The Aim of the Instinct is defined by several key characteristics that distinguish it from the other components of the drive. Most importantly, it is defined by termination. An action qualifies as the instinctual aim only if its execution leads directly to the abatement of the underlying internal stimulus. This makes the aim functionally equivalent to the satisfaction of the need itself, irrespective of the complexity of the action required to achieve it.

A crucial characteristic of the aim is its inherent conservatism, a concept Freud derived from biological theory regarding the constancy principle. Freud argued that all life instincts (Eros) fundamentally seek a return to a previous, lower state of tension (aligned with the Nirvana principle), while the Death Instinct (Thanatos) aims for a return to inorganic matter. This conservative nature means that while the specific actions (the aims) required for satisfaction are achieved cyclically, the fundamental drive toward tension reduction is constant and unavoidable. The aim, therefore, provides the directional arrow for psychic energy (libido or aggressive energy), ensuring that behavior is always oriented toward minimizing internal discomfort.

Furthermore, the aim is characterized by its potential for modification. While the ultimate function of the drive (tension discharge) cannot change, the specific behavioral route taken to achieve that discharge can be inhibited, redirected, or substituted. This leads to the concept of **Instinctual Vicissitudes**, where the aim might be:

Reversal into the Opposite: Such as turning an aim toward the self (e.g., sadism turning into masochism).

Sublimation: Redirecting the aggressive or sexual aim toward a non-sexual, socially valued goal.

Inhibition: Suppression of the aim, leading to neurosis or fixation of energy.

This flexibility of the aim, constrained only by the necessity of achieving discharge, is what allows for complex human adaptation and the differentiation of culture from pure biology.

4. Role in Psychic Economy

Within Freud's economic model of the mind, the aim of the instinct plays a pivotal role in regulating the flow of psychic energy (cathexis). The entire system is initially governed by the **Pleasure Principle**, which dictates that the primary function of the mental apparatus is the immediate discharge of tension, minimizing unpleasure. The instinctual aim is the immediate, direct manifestation of this principle; when the aim is successfully executed, pleasure results from the reduction of excitation.

However, the psychic economy must also operate under the constraints of the **Reality Principle**, which is learned through experience and mediated by the ego. The reality principle does not abandon the goal of satisfaction but necessitates the postponement, redirection, or modification of the aim to account for external constraints, social norms, and potential dangers. For instance, the instinctual aim of immediate aggressive discharge (e.g., physically attacking a rival) might be delayed or channeled into a more socially acceptable aim (e.g., verbal competition or rigorous debate) to avoid punishment or loss of relationship. The ego assesses reality and modifies the means (the object and the timing) by which the aim is achieved.

The tension between the immediate, impulsive demands of the instinct (driven by the aim) and the mediating function of the ego forms the core of intrapsychic conflict. The choice of an appropriate aim--one that satisfies the Id's demands while conforming to the Ego's reality testing and the Superego's moral standards--is a hallmark of mature psychological functioning. If the aim is too rigidly constrained or entirely denied, the energy associated with the impetus does not dissipate, leading to psychological symptoms and neuroses, as the system struggles unsuccessfully to achieve the fundamental goal of tension discharge.

5. Clinical Significance and Examples

The concept of the instinctual aim is clinically significant because it provides a framework for understanding the vast array of human behavioral adaptations and psychopathologies. Since the aim is generally flexible (it can be modified or displaced), psychopathology often arises when the aim becomes fixated, inhibited, or redirected in a maladaptive manner. A key mechanism involving the modification of the aim is **Reaction Formation**, where the unacceptable aim of an instinct is replaced in consciousness by its exact opposite. For example, the aim of an aggressive instinct (to harm or destroy a specific object) might be replaced by an excessive aim of nurture, protection, or care toward that object, functioning as a defense against the underlying hostile impulse.

In the context of the sexual instincts, the concept of the aim explains **perversions**. Sexual instinct has a primary, reproductive aim (genital union leading to orgasm), but various forms of partial aims (suchism, voyeurism, or exhibitionism) also exist. A perversion occurs when one of these partial aims, which normally serves as a preliminary or preparatory step toward the primary aim, becomes the final and definitive aim of the instinct itself. This substitution demonstrates the plasticity of the aim, provided the substitute action still achieves the core functional requirement of tension discharge for the individual.

Furthermore, in therapeutic settings, analyzing the patient's choices of aim (both conscious and unconscious) provides crucial insight into their defensive structure. If a patient is unable to achieve a satisfactory, direct aim (e.g., emotional intimacy), the energy may be displaced onto a secondary, safer aim (e.g., obsessive cleaning or intellectualization). The therapeutic work often involves helping the patient recognize the original, inhibited aim and find new, integrated, and realistic means of achieving satisfaction.

6. Debates and Criticisms

While the internal structure of the instinct is vital to classical psychoanalysis, the concept of the instinctual aim has shared in the broader criticisms leveled against classical **Drive Theory** (*Triebtheorie*). The most significant critiques stem from the shift in emphasis in psychoanalysis away from purely biological, internal drives toward relational and psychological determinants, especially among post-Freudian schools.

Critics, particularly those rooted in **Object Relations theory** (e.g., Melanie Klein, Donald Winnicott) and **Attachment theory**, argue that human motivation is not primarily driven by the need to discharge internal tension (the function of the aim), but rather by the inherent psychological need to form meaningful relationships and attachments with others. In this view, the search for an object is primary and motivated by relational needs, and satisfaction (the achievement of the aim) is secondary to relational security and the maintenance of connection. This perspective diminishes the economic importance of the aim as a solely tension-reducing mechanism and elevates the

importance of interaction and interpersonal dynamics in shaping psychic life.

Furthermore, developmental psychologists and modern neuroscientists have questioned the strict biological determinism implied by the fixed nature of the aim's core function. Contemporary motivational science often utilizes complex models of goal pursuit, focusing on reward systems (dopaminergic pathways) and cognitive planning rather than a hydraulic model of energy flow and discharge. Nonetheless, the core insight remains: behavior is goal-directed and oriented toward achieving an internally defined state of satisfaction or equilibrium, even if the mechanisms underlying that goal-setting are now understood through a blend of biological, cognitive, and relational factors.

7. Further Reading

[Instincts and Their Vicissitudes \(S. Freud, 1915\)](#)

[Freud's Metapsychological Papers \(Including Trieb\)](#)

[Psychoanalytic Drive Theory](#)