

# PRINCIPLE OF CONSTANCY

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## Introduction and Definition of the Principle of Constancy

The Principle of Constancy, frequently referred to within psychoanalytic literature as the Constancy Law, constitutes a fundamental theoretical postulate regarding the core operational mechanism of the mental apparatus. Psychoanalytically, this principle asserts that all psychic processes are characterized by an inherent and persistent tendency to maintain or restore a state of equilibrium and stability, resisting any fluctuation or increase in internal energy or tension. This drive toward constancy is viewed not merely as a passive preference for stasis, but rather as a dynamic, regulatory mandate governing the psychic economy, ensuring the system operates optimally by minimizing disruptive internal excitation. When internal or external stimuli introduce energy into the system, creating a state of tension or excitation that deviates from the preferred baseline, the mental apparatus immediately engages in processes--such as discharge, defense mechanisms, or structural adaptation--intended to reduce this energy accumulation. Consequently, stability is theorized as the ultimate end goal for all mental processes, dictating how the organism perceives, reacts, and adapts to its environment to sustain a manageable internal state.

This conception of the mind as an energy-regulating system owes a significant intellectual debt to 19th-century scientific models, particularly those pertaining to thermodynamics and the conservation of energy, which deeply influenced Sigmund Freud's early metapsychology. The Principle of Constancy proposes that the psychic system strives to keep the quantity of excitation present within it at the lowest possible level, or at least to maintain it at a constant level, thereby functioning as a crucial homeostatic mechanism. Unpleasure, within this framework, is directly equated with the rise in this internal energy level, while pleasure corresponds to the experience of its reduction and the successful restoration of the constant state. Therefore, the entire architecture of human motivation, from basic physiological drives to complex psychological behaviors, is ultimately rooted in the imperative to manage and discharge this psychic energy effectively, preventing the system from becoming overwhelmed by accumulating internal pressures. Understanding this principle is essential for grasping the subsequent development of concepts like the Pleasure Principle and the Nirvana Principle, which elaborate upon the specific ways this constant striving for stability manifests in behavior.

The principle serves as the bedrock for understanding phenomena ranging from the most rudimentary reflex arcs to highly complex neurotic symptoms. A simple reflex, such as immediate withdrawal from a painful stimulus, represents the most direct and unmediated fulfillment of the Constancy Principle, immediately discharging the sensory excitation that threatens internal stability. More complicated psychological defenses, such as repression or displacement, are conceptualized as indirect, often unconscious, attempts to manage tension that cannot be immediately discharged or reduced through direct action. These defensive maneuvers are mechanisms of constancy maintenance, designed to prevent the painful awareness of overwhelming internal conflict or traumatic memories from disturbing the fragile equilibrium of the

ego. The enduring power of the Constancy Law lies in its capacity to provide a unified energetic explanation for both normal and pathological mental functioning, suggesting that all mental activity, regardless of its apparent complexity, is fundamentally driven by the single, overarching goal of minimizing internal disequilibrium.

In essence, the Constancy Law provides the foundational mechanism for the psychological structure to endure and function cohesively over time. Without this regulatory drive, the mental apparatus would be perpetually subject to the chaotic influx of stimuli, both internal (drives, needs) and external (sensory input), leading to overwhelming disorganization. The principle mandates a continuous process of regulation, assimilation, and discharge, ensuring that energy is managed efficiently. It establishes a necessary tension between the organism and its environment: the environment constantly introduces energy and excitation, while the internal system constantly works to master, bind, and ultimately discharge this energy. This ongoing struggle to maintain a steady state against entropic forces is what defines psychic life according to this classical psychoanalytic perspective, making the Principle of Constancy the primary explanatory tool for understanding motivational dynamics before the introduction of the death drive.

## Historical Context and Physiological Foundations

The conceptual genesis of the Principle of Constancy is deeply embedded in the intellectual climate of 19th-century biology and physics, specifically within Freud's early physiological project, which aimed to create a purely scientific psychology. Freud's training under Ernst Brücke, a proponent of mechanism who rejected vitalism, heavily influenced his view that the mind must be understood through physical, energetic laws. The initial formulation of this principle can be traced back to Freud's 1895 unfinished work, the **Project for a Scientific Psychology**, where he attempted to model the neurological system using concepts of quantities (Q) of excitation and the inertia principle. The principle of neuronal inertia stipulated that neurons tend to divest themselves completely of the quantity of excitation they receive, striving for zero tension. While the inertia principle proved too simplistic for complex psychic life--as total discharge would be impossible and lead to death--it served as the necessary precursor to the Principle of Constancy, which modified the goal from zero tension to the maintenance of a stable, low level of tension.

Furthermore, Freud was influenced by Gustav Fechner's concept of psychic stability, particularly the idea that conscious life tends toward states of stability and away from states of instability. Fechner's emphasis on the tendency of the organism to maintain optimal equilibrium provided Freud with a psychological analog for the physical laws of conservation of energy. By translating these physical and physiological concepts into a psychological theory, Freud established a system where libido (psychic energy) was subject to quantitative laws, capable of displacement, binding, and discharge. This framework allowed for psychological phenomena, such as anxiety, to be understood as the accumulation of unbound energy, and therapeutic intervention to be

conceptualized as the process of making this energy manageable and subject to controlled discharge, thereby restoring constancy. The initial reliance on these scientific metaphors underscores the formal, mechanistic approach Freud took to metapsychology in his attempt to elevate psychoanalysis to the status of a rigorous science.

The shift from the strict inertia principle to the Constancy Principle marked a critical evolutionary step in Freud's thinking, acknowledging that life requires a certain level of tension for basic functioning and survival. If the psychic system sought absolute zero excitation, it would cease to engage with the world, a state analogous to death. Therefore, the Principle of Constancy allows for a dynamic baseline: the system seeks not zero energy, but rather the minimal energy level consistent with the internal conditions necessary for living. This necessary modification allowed Freud to incorporate the reality of biological needs and drives, which inherently involve the periodic accumulation of tension (e.g., hunger, sexual desire) that must be tolerated until appropriate discharge can be found. This adaptation laid the groundwork for differentiating between primary process thinking, which seeks immediate discharge (inertia), and secondary process thinking, which manages and delays discharge (constancy and reality principles).

By defining psychic operations in terms of energy management, the Principle of Constancy provided a powerful explanatory structure for the concept of trauma. Trauma, in this context, is understood as an event that introduces an overwhelming quantity of excitation into the psychic apparatus, exceeding the system's capacity to bind or discharge it effectively. Because the system cannot immediately restore constancy, the excess energy remains active, leading to repetitive behaviors (compulsion to repeat) or chronic anxiety states, all of which represent the system's desperate and often pathological attempt to belatedly master the energy influx and restore equilibrium. Thus, the principle's initial ties to physiological energy models provided a compelling and internally consistent framework for understanding the psychic impact of overwhelming external events and the resulting attempts at recovery and stability maintenance.

## **Constancy, Homeostasis, and Adaptation**

The Principle of Constancy is often viewed as the psychological analogue of biological homeostasis, the concept that living systems actively regulate their internal conditions to maintain stability necessary for survival. While homeostasis is typically applied to physiological parameters like temperature and blood sugar, the Constancy Law applies this regulatory imperative to the realm of psychic energy and psychological tension. Both mechanisms underscore the organism's innate tendency toward self-preservation through internal regulation. However, the psychoanalytic concept expands beyond mere biological regulation to include the management of internal drives, fantasies, and conflicts, emphasizing the energetic struggle involved in maintaining psychological integration and coherence amidst competing demands. The successful operation of the Principle of Constancy is therefore synonymous with psychological health and adaptation, as it allows the

individual to manage the inevitable stresses of life without falling into disorganized states of overwhelming anxiety or pathological defense.

Adaptation, in the context of the Constancy Principle, is the process by which the ego learns to manage increases in tension in a way that aligns with external reality. Initially, the psyche defaults to the quickest path to constancy (primary process discharge). However, effective adaptation requires developing methods to bind energy--to hold tension in check--and to tolerate temporary increases in excitation while formulating a realistic plan for discharge. For example, delaying gratification, a hallmark of mature ego function, is a sophisticated adaptive maneuver that temporarily compromises the immediate goal of constancy but ultimately ensures a more stable and lasting reduction of tension in the long run. The development of psychic structure, particularly the ego, is fundamentally the institutionalization of regulatory mechanisms designed to serve the Principle of Constancy in complex ways that respect the demands of the external world.

When the adaptive capacities of the ego fail to maintain constancy, psychological symptoms and pathologies often emerge. Neuroses, for instance, can be interpreted as failed attempts to restore equilibrium, where the repressed material (unbound energy or conflictual ideas) continues to exert pressure, threatening to overwhelm the system. The symptom itself--a phobia, an obsession, or a conversion reaction--is a compromise formation; it is an attempt to bind the free-floating, painful excitation into a specific, manageable form, thereby partially restoring a sense of control and stability, even if the method is ultimately self-defeating. The chronic nature of many psychological disorders reflects the persistent failure of the individual's regulatory mechanisms to effectively manage the accumulation of internal tension stemming from conflict or past trauma, demonstrating the constant, unrelenting pressure of the system to return to its preferred stable state.

The principle also governs the dynamics of learning and cognitive organization. New information or unexpected experiences often introduce a temporary state of disequilibrium. The cognitive apparatus, driven by the need for constancy, works to assimilate this new input, modifying existing schemata (psychic structures) until the novel information is integrated and the system returns to a state of stable coherence. This regulatory process highlights that constancy is not static preservation but a dynamic restoration. It involves active work--the work of mourning, the work of analysis, the work of adaptation--all aimed at neutralizing disruptive forces. Thus, the Principle of Constancy functions as a vital engine for both psychological survival and intellectual growth, dictating the necessity of mastering internal and external challenges to maintain a fundamental sense of psychological stability.

## **The Pleasure Principle as a Manifestation of Constancy**

The Pleasure Principle is conceptually inseparable from the Principle of Constancy, operating as the most immediate and subjectively experienced manifestation of the fundamental drive toward

equilibrium. While constancy is the metapsychological law dictating the system's goal, the Pleasure Principle defines how the organism experiences success or failure in achieving that goal: pleasure is the subjective correlate of a decrease in tension, and unpleasure is the subjective correlate of an increase in tension. In the earliest stages of development, particularly in the infant, the psychic apparatus functions almost entirely under the dominance of the Pleasure Principle, demanding the immediate and unqualified discharge of any accumulated excitation, such as hunger or discomfort, to instantly restore constancy.

This primary reliance on the Pleasure Principle, driven by the Constancy Law, gives rise to primary process thinking. Primary process thinking is characterized by irrationality, disregard for logic, and the substitution of reality with fantasy or hallucination, provided these mental acts achieve the desired energetic outcome--the immediate, if hallucinatory, reduction of tension. For example, a hungry infant might hallucinate the presence of the mother's breast, an attempt by the psyche to reduce the pain of hunger tension by substituting internal satisfaction for external reality. This immediate drive towards discharge reflects the most direct and primitive way the Constancy Law attempts to govern the organism, seeking the quickest path, regardless of its objective effectiveness in the real world.

The crucial distinction emerges when considering the constraints imposed by reality. Since external reality rarely permits instant gratification, reliance solely on the Pleasure Principle would lead to frequent frustration and potential self-destruction. This conflict necessitates the development of the ego and the introduction of the Reality Principle. The Reality Principle is not a rejection of the Constancy Law or the pursuit of pleasure, but rather a modification of the means by which constancy is achieved. It operates in the service of the Constancy Law by instructing the organism to tolerate temporary increases in tension (delaying discharge) in exchange for securing a more certain and lasting satisfaction later on. Thus, the Reality Principle ensures that the underlying drive for stability is fulfilled through adaptive, realistic means, transforming the immediate, short-term goal of the Pleasure Principle into a long-term strategy for stability.

In essence, the relationship is hierarchical: the Principle of Constancy establishes the energetic mandate (reduce tension), the Pleasure Principle defines the immediate subjective experience related to success or failure in meeting this mandate (pleasure/unpleasure), and the Reality Principle acts as the sophisticated regulator, guiding the execution of the Constancy Law in a complex world. All three concepts are fundamentally interdependent mechanisms aimed at managing psychic energy and preserving the integrity of the mental apparatus. The failure to integrate the Reality Principle fully results in a vulnerability where the individual remains overly susceptible to internal tension, relying on immediate but often ineffective methods of discharge, characteristic of severe regression or impulsive pathology.

## The Nirvana Principle and the Drive Towards Absolute Reduction

The Nirvana Principle represents an extreme, theoretical extension of the Principle of Constancy, postulating a drive towards the absolute reduction of all internal tension, approaching a state of complete energetic zero. This concept, introduced by Freud later in his career, particularly in relation to the death drive (Thanatos) in **Beyond the Pleasure Principle** (1920), suggests that the ultimate, deepest tendency of the psychic apparatus is not merely to maintain a low, stable level of excitation, but to return to an inorganic state of absolute rest. While the Constancy Principle governs the practical, daily operations of the living organism by seeking a manageable equilibrium, the Nirvana Principle points toward a profound, underlying tendency to abolish all stimulation, reflecting a biological drive inherent in all organic life to return to the stability of the inanimate.

This distinction is crucial for understanding the energetic conflict within the psyche. The life instincts (Eros), guided by the Principle of Constancy and moderated by the Reality Principle, strive to manage excitation effectively to prolong life and maintain necessary functional tension. Conversely, the death drive (Thanatos), manifesting through the Nirvana Principle, pushes towards the complete abolition of all tension. Freud posited that the aggression and destructive impulses observed in humans are often the outward displacement of this inward drive towards self-destruction and absolute zero excitation. The psychic apparatus must constantly work to deflect this powerful inner tendency outwards, where it manifests as aggression against external objects or others, thereby protecting the self from immediate complete internal discharge and allowing the Constancy Principle to maintain life.

The clinical relevance of the Nirvana Principle lies in its ability to explain phenomena that contradict the seemingly overriding mandate of the Pleasure Principle, such as the repetition compulsion and masochism. If the mind only sought pleasure and avoided unpleasure, why would individuals repeatedly seek out painful situations or re-enact traumatic events? The repetition compulsion is interpreted as the system's deep-seated, often desperate attempt to retrospectively master an overwhelming energy influx (trauma) that could not be mastered at the time of its occurrence, driven by the profound, reductive tendency of the Nirvana Principle to bind and neutralize the excess energy, even if the process involves temporary pain. This mechanism demonstrates the profound power of the drive toward stability, even when it manifests in seemingly irrational, self-destructive patterns.

Thus, the Nirvana Principle provides a deeper, almost metaphysical foundation for the Constancy Law. The Constancy Principle ensures functional stability in life, preventing the system from overheating, whereas the Nirvana Principle represents the ultimate destination of all reductive processes--a state of final, absolute equilibrium achieved only in death. The tension between these two drives--the life-preserving, constant work of the ego (Constancy) and the ultimate, reductive pull towards non-existence (Nirvana)--forms the central dynamic conflict underlying the entire

framework of mature psychoanalytic metapsychology. This conflict highlights that psychic life is a constant, energetic struggle against the inherent tendency toward dissolution.

## Clinical Implications and Therapeutic Goals

In clinical practice, the Principle of Constancy provides a fundamental framework for understanding the genesis of psychological distress and guiding therapeutic interventions. Psychological symptoms are invariably viewed as manifestations of a failure in the system's regulatory capacity to maintain constancy. When the ego is unable to effectively bind, assimilate, or discharge psychic energy arising from instinctual drives or external trauma, the resulting unbound excitation is experienced as acute anxiety. The formation of a neurosis is understood as the mind's compromised, often dysfunctional, attempt to restore constancy by channeling this unbound energy into a symptom, which, while painful, is less chaotic than free-floating anxiety.

The primary goal of psychoanalytic therapy, viewed through the lens of the Constancy Principle, is to assist the patient in mastering previously unmanageable quantities of excitation. This process involves converting free-floating energy into bound energy, allowing the ego to integrate and process material that was previously overwhelming. Techniques such as interpretation, working through, and transference analysis all serve this energetic purpose. By bringing repressed material (sources of unmanageable tension) into consciousness and articulating the underlying conflicts, the analyst helps the patient's ego to bind the energy associated with these conflicts, thereby reducing the internal pressure and restoring a more robust state of equilibrium. Insight, in this context, is effective because it transforms a chaotic, energetic threat into a psychological fact that can be rationally managed and integrated.

Furthermore, the Principle of Constancy helps explain the resistance encountered in therapy. Resistance is not merely willful opposition but an active defensive maneuver employed by the ego to maintain its current, albeit symptomatic, state of stability. Even a deeply dysfunctional neurosis represents a form of constancy--a compromised equilibrium that the ego is reluctant to abandon because confronting the underlying conflict threatens to unleash overwhelming, unbound tension. The analyst must proceed carefully, respecting the patient's need for constancy while gradually increasing the ego's capacity to tolerate temporary increases in tension necessary for meaningful structural change. The therapeutic process is therefore an exercise in gradually expanding the patient's capacity for energetic mastery.

Successful resolution in analysis signifies the patient achieving a more flexible and adaptive state of constancy. This means the individual is better able to utilize the Reality Principle to manage drives, tolerate frustration without severe regression, and employ defense mechanisms that are less costly and rigid. The restored constancy is characterized by a stable baseline where the flow of psychic energy is manageable, allowing the individual to pursue life goals and relationships

effectively without being dominated by internal pressures. Ultimately, the therapeutic success is measured by the establishment of a robust, dynamic equilibrium--a state of psychic stability achieved through conscious regulation rather than rigid repression.

## Critiques and Evolutionary Modifications

Despite its central role in classical metapsychology, the Principle of Constancy has faced substantial critique and undergone significant modification throughout the evolution of psychoanalytic thought and related psychological disciplines. One major criticism stems from its inherently reductive and mechanistic nature, derived from 19th-century physics. Critics argue that reducing complex human motivations--such as creativity, curiosity, and altruism--to mere attempts to lower tension fails to account for behaviors that actively seek out novelty, challenge, and increased stimulation, phenomena that seem to contradict the principle's core mandate of minimizing excitation. Many human activities are driven by the search for optimal tension, rather than minimal tension, suggesting that a simple reductive model is insufficient.

Ego psychology, while retaining the concept of constancy, modified it significantly by focusing on the ego's autonomous functions and its capacity to neutralize instinctual energy. Ego psychologists emphasized that the ego eventually develops conflict-free spheres that operate independently of the primary drives, and that energy can be neutralized (de-sexualized and de-aggressivized) for adaptive purposes, such as learning and perception, rather than solely for immediate discharge. This perspective shifted the focus from the quantity of excitation to the quality of ego functioning and its adaptive capacity, suggesting that the goal is not just minimum tension, but effective mastery and utilization of tension for growth and environmental engagement.

Object relations theory and relational psychoanalysis further challenged the strict energetic model, prioritizing interpersonal relationships and attachment needs over internal energy management as the primary motivators. While these schools acknowledge the need for internal stability, they argue that constancy is achieved primarily through stable, secure relationships with others, rather than through an internal, hydraulic reduction of drives. For these theorists, the greatest threat to psychic stability is not unbound energy, but relational disruption and the loss of connection, shifting the focus from an internal, closed system to an open, interactive system where regulation is achieved intersubjectively.

In contemporary cognitive and neuroscientific terms, the Principle of Constancy finds parallels in concepts such as predictive coding and allostasis. Predictive coding posits that the brain constantly generates hypotheses about incoming sensory data, aiming to minimize prediction error, which is conceptually similar to minimizing cognitive tension or surprise. Allostasis, a refinement of homeostasis, describes the process of achieving stability through change--the body actively adjusts its set points in anticipation of future demand, rather than passively reacting to deviations.

These modern concepts validate the fundamental idea that the brain is a system dedicated to maintaining internal stability and minimizing disruptive signals, but they frame the process as actively predictive and adaptive, moving beyond the simple, discharge-oriented model proposed in Freud's initial formulation of the Constancy Law.

## The Role of Constancy in Cognitive and Affective Regulation

Beyond classical drive theory, the underlying mechanism described by the Principle of Constancy remains highly relevant for understanding modern theories of affective regulation and cognitive stability. Affective regulation is essentially the psychological work of maintaining emotional equilibrium, preventing emotional experiences from becoming overwhelming or disruptive to functioning. When an individual experiences intense emotion (a surge of excitation), the Constancy Principle mandates that the system must engage regulatory strategies--be they conscious (e.g., reappraisal, distraction) or unconscious (e.g., denial, repression)--to bring the intensity of the affective experience back to a tolerable, stable baseline. Failure in affective regulation is precisely the failure to restore constancy, leading to dysregulated states such as panic attacks, severe mood swings, or chronic anxiety.

Cognitive dissonance theory, originating in social psychology, also reflects an operation of the Constancy Principle. Cognitive dissonance, the painful state experienced when one holds two conflicting beliefs or when behavior contradicts beliefs, represents a significant increase in psychological tension or disequilibrium. The individual is strongly motivated to reduce this dissonance (restore constancy) by changing a belief, modifying a behavior, or seeking justifying information. This drive to reduce cognitive tension and achieve internal coherence underscores the pervasive influence of the constancy mandate across various psychological domains, demonstrating that the need for stability extends far beyond the management of instinctual drives.

Furthermore, the maintenance of a stable sense of self, or ego constancy, is a crucial psychological achievement rooted in this principle. The self-structure must remain relatively consistent and coherent despite the continuous influx of new experiences, challenges, and conflicting self-representations. When the self-structure is threatened by contradictory information or internal conflict, the ego mobilizes defenses to protect its integrity and maintain a stable identity, thereby serving the Constancy Law at a structural level. Borderline personality organization, for instance, is often characterized by a profound failure to maintain object constancy and self-constancy, resulting in chaotic shifts in self-perception and intense affective dysregulation, highlighting the devastating consequences of a breakdown in these regulatory capacities.

In contemporary neuroscience, the brain's effort to maintain optimal arousal levels is a direct parallel to the Constancy Principle. The reticular activating system and related neural networks continuously monitor and regulate the level of excitation to ensure the brain is alert enough to

function but not so overstimulated as to become disorganized. Stress, biologically and psychologically, is the reaction to an increased demand on the system's regulatory capacity; chronic stress represents a persistent state of disequilibrium where the system is constantly struggling, often unsuccessfully, to restore constancy. Therefore, while the language of libido and discharge has evolved, the core concept--that the psychological system is fundamentally geared toward minimizing disruptive tension and maintaining a preferred state of stability--remains a central tenet in understanding mental function.

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