

## The Problem with Neuropsychanalysis - A Reply to John Dall'Aglio

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I write in response to an article in the previous volume of *Psychoanalysis Lacan* by John Dall'Aglio (2020), on the prospect of a Lacanian neuropsychanalysis. It is in a spirit of open discussion that I wish to debate certain points raised in the article, which I hope will be of interest not only on the question of neuropsychanalysis, but also questions of the relation of Lacanian psychoanalysis to science, philosophy, and ethics more broadly.

### Neuroreductionism and Psychoanalysis

Dall'Aglio is justified in noting a rather too casual dismissal of neuroscience *tout court* by some Lacanian psychoanalysts. Neuroscience, like other sciences, is not wholly reductive, biopolitical, or totalising. It is not difficult to find neuroscientific researchers diligently and ethically pursuing knowledge of the brain and its relation to the body and world, without any sinister aim, and devoid of any disavowal of epistemological lack. This much should be affirmed.

Neuropsychanalysis, so-called, is not to be identified too closely with the discipline of neuroscience. The former is not merely an accumulation of knowledge but a praxis, an application of knowledge toward clinical ends. Just as Lacan and Freud put various discourses to work in their praxes - ranging from linguistics, literature, philosophy, anthropology, and many others - the neuropsychanalysts, most prominently represented by Mark Solms, draw upon the discourse of neuroscience for their praxes. I say the 'discourse' of neuroscience because, notwithstanding its empirical basis or otherwise, from a Lacanian standpoint, no science, including that involving the neuro-, is extra-discursive. Neuroscience is not and cannot be the metalanguage of psychoanalysis, only a discourse in its own right. Psychoanalysis, as Lacan said on many occasions, is not a science, and whilst its findings may lend themselves to generalisation, these generalisations are strictly limited, and subordinate to the clinical aim of working with singularity.

Just as Lacanians have vanquished mere neuroscientific strawmen, so too have Lacanians been reduced to mere strawmen. It is true, as Dall'Aglio says,

that the subject is not 'totally unrelated to the brain', insofar as the subject - a speaking body, of which the brain is a subset - would cease its speaking were this brain to perish. It is difficult to recall any Lacanian ever advancing a contrary claim. The question then is what, in positive terms, is the relation of a (Lacanian) subject with a brain, or more precisely, the empirical measures of a brain. The Lacanian subject is both an effect of language (a point to which I shall return) and non-identical with itself. Consequently, it does not follow from the proposition that a subject has a relation to a brain that this subject can be localised, or even correlated with (representations of) a brain. A subject non-identical with itself would presumably also be non-identical with its brain, with the representations merely adding further layers of alienation and abstraction to the original non-identity. The spirit is not an MRI scan. This is a problem not limited to the neuropsychologists. I have previously questioned whether attempts by the likes of Adrian Johnston<sup>1</sup> to link neuroscience and Lacanian psychoanalysis constitute a misunderstanding of both disciplines (see Ferraro, 2018). The German philosopher Markus Gabriel has convincingly argued for a repudiation of identity between mind and brain without falling into the usual traps of Cartesian dualism (see Gabriel, 2017). In a discursively-constituted praxis such as psychoanalysis, it remains to be demonstrated that the study of neuroscience is epistemologically compatible, much less relevant.

### **The (Mis)Uses of Repression**

A more detail examination of the notion of repression in psychoanalysis brings out these incompatibilities in clearer detail. An perusal of the neuropsychanalytic literature - and here, Solms (2019, 2020) is the paradigmatic example - shows that the discourse attempts, repeatedly, to situate repression as something 'internal' to the subject, localised within a neural zone, and as psychologicistic defence mechanism. This stands in contrast to Lacan's position in which repression is a structural, and structuring, distinction, to be found essentially at the nexus between language and the prohibition of incestuous jouissance, and further by the inherent dissociability of signifier and signified. Language, in Lacan's teaching, comes to hold a formative influence both on the 'inside' and 'outside' of subjectivity. The 'inside' and 'outside' themselves are dialecticised in the teaching such that

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<sup>1</sup> One can only wince at Johnston's characterisation of psychoanalysis as a 'logoscience'.

they tend toward their supposed opposite, as in the case of the term 'extimacy', or Lacan's use of the Möbius strip. In neuropsychanalysis, a distant descendant of the ego psychology of old, (but with notable atavistic tendencies), 'inside 'and 'outside 'are rendered as inert dualism, forcing adherents to shoehorn repression into the category of a merely psychological, and ultimately biological operation.

Lacan purports to be faithful to Freud in returning to a repression that is not merely a contingent psychic 'defence', but a dialectical unity of 'inside 'and 'outside', in which 'Law', prohibition, the taboo against incest, castration (qua reduction of jouissance, namely, drive satisfaction), and attendant lack (and forbidden desire) come to be interiorised. To search for this repression in the brain, or in the mind, for that matter, makes as much sense as searching for the Federal legislation of Australia within the brain (or mind). Rather than simply asking subjects about their relations to such legislation, or organising a sociological study of its implementation and effects, or perusing and analysing the legislation itself, the neuropsychanalyst wishes to seek, via the fMRI, for the Federal legislation receptors in the brain which would be the 'verification ' that the subject in question in this jurisdiction holds a relation to the Law.

When Freud, via his papers on metapsychology, sought to clarify his notion of repression, he indicated that it was the *Vorstellungsrepräsentanz* - the 'ideational representatives 'in Strachey's translation - that was repressed. This is the term that Lacan designates as the 'signifier', and the Freudian distinction between (repressed) 'unacceptable idea 'and its associated affect or symptom is, in Lacanian terms, isomorphic with the structure of the signifier and the signified. This latter terminology derives from Saussure's structural linguistics, in which the signifier/signified constitute the two elements of the sign, and these two elements are, in principle, dissociable. Note also that, for both Freud and Lacan, repression is not merely an incidental 'defence 'but a fundamental structuring operation that comes to organise the very structure of subjectivity. For Freud, this operation is divided into primary and secondary repression, the former being that which establishes the Freudian unconscious as such. In Lacan, repression is the *sine qua non* condition of neurotic structure. In both accounts, whilst repressed material can emerge into speech through the psychoanalytic process, thereby curing symptoms and fixations (at least in theory), repression as such is never 'cured'. Furthermore, as a foundational moment in the development of 'normal '(i.e. neurotic) subjectivity, repression

sets in motion a number of sequelae which owe their emergence to this moment. The movement of metaphor and metonymy, for example, and the formations of the unconscious (such as parapraxes and dreams) are ultimately traceable to repression.

As we shall see, just as the Solms model of neuropsychanalysis cannot deal with *jouissance*, it is similarly unable to address linguistic phenomena. What purports to be a psychoanalytic theory fused with neuroscience is everywhere mere cognitivism, inserted into psychoanalytic concepts such that the latter are completely unrecognisable. Thus, repression for Solms (2019) becomes 'prematurely automatised predictions', a cognitivist definition which has literally nothing to do with the formulations of Freud, Lacan, or the greater bulk of the psychoanalytic tradition. Moreover, note that this definition implicitly situates such 'repression' as a kind of cognitive error, from which it follows that the role of treatment, in this paradigm, is essentially didactic. Repression, for Lacan, has an intimate relation to desire. This is the key theme of his seminar on ethics (Lacan, 1992). The sort of repression that Solms appears to have in mind bears no relation to the Law, or to unarticulated desire. Purged of desire, neuropsychanalysis is reduced to warmed-over cognitive-behaviour therapy (CBT), panel-beating 'residual prediction error'. That desire is exiled from neuropsychanalysis is all the more troubling from a Lacanian perspective, wherein the fundamental division of the subject is arguably not the conscious-unconscious divide of old, but that of a barred subject and the *objet petit a*. It goes without saying that the *objet petit a* does not show up on an fMRI scan.

### **The Real and *Jouissance***

The problems with neuropsychanalysis do not stop with the debasement of the concept of repression. Things are even worse when one considers the place of *jouissance*, which is one of Lacan's fundamental contributions to psychoanalysis and represents an attempt at translating what, in Freudian terms, was a satisfaction lying beyond the pleasure principle. In effect, the existence of anything beyond the pleasure principle, much less something that produces satisfaction (via the compulsion to repeat), remains a scandalous notion outside of psychoanalysis, and is practically non-existent in empirical psychology, despite an extensive history in literature and philosophy long pre-dating Freud.

Freud (1915/1957, p. 122-3) distinguished four elements of the drive: its aim, its object, its pressure, and its source. The first two are of particular concern here. The aim of the drive (mistranslated by Strachey as 'instinct') 'is in every instance 'satisfaction', which Lacan denotes as 'jouissance'. What is crucial, however, is that as far as the drive's object is concerned, this can be anything whatsoever that can assist in producing satisfaction. The introduction of the signifier to the speaking body of the subject as conceived in Lacanian psychoanalysis entails that the effect of the former on the latter is a radical denaturalisation. Each of the most intimate and 'natural' of bodily needs - for instance, eating, sleep, excretory functions, sex, etc - comes to be socially mediated qua drives, and thus the category of 'object' must be distinguished from some 'natural' complement that would fulfil a socially-unmediated, merely biological 'need'. When Lacan came to formalise his notion of the drive, he expressed it as 'barred S, cut of capital D, demand' (Lacan, 2004, p. 65), which is to say that the drive arises in conjunction with the signifier and demand to the Other, and not as pure, unmediated 'need'. This is one of the meanings of Lacan's famous quip about the non-existence of a sexual rapport, namely, that since there is no 'natural' complement for each of the sexual partners, each 'object' deployed as a mode of jouissance is by definition partial, substitutive, and even fetishistic. Likewise, the object of a drive, in this iteration of psychoanalytic theory, can very easily be something that is disastrous for the subject when viewed as a purely biological organism. People can enjoy themselves to death. Again, to refer to Lacan's seminar on ethics, the 'instincts' (i.e. 'innate' biological needs) may very well proceed along the lines of the pleasure and reality principles, but this is separate from jouissance (Freud's 'satisfaction') which always contains dimensions of the death drive.

In view of this, it is extremely unclear how or why neuropsychologists would set about constructing a taxonomy of 'innate needs' apart from gaining satisfaction for taxonomania, as these 'needs' are outside of the very definition of a drive as understood in psychoanalysis. In a sense, 'need' itself is only a retroactively-positing supposition. Consequently, when Solms insists that 'attachment', 'play', etc are 'innate needs', he has foreclosed the greater portion of Freud's discoveries by remaining at the level of 'instinct' (as opposed to drive) and the pleasure principle (as opposed to jouissance). Again, this places neuropsychology somewhere between the ego psychology of old and CBT. When Solms (2019) says that 'The main task of

mental development is to learn how to meet these needs in the world', he has already replaced the subject of psychoanalysis with the impoverished quasi-computer model of cognitivism. A clinician would have to possess a particularly deaf ear with respect to his or her patients to imagine that the patient's satisfaction - via sexuality, for instance - is simply reducible to taking the most efficient path possible between two points.

Thus, it is inadequate for Dall'Aglio to suggest that neuroscience accounts for the real by way of allowing for 'gaps' within its formalisations. To be sure, the Žižekian definition of the real as a 'gap' immanent to discourse is valid, but only from the standpoint of imaginary-symbolic representation (*Vorstellung*). From the standpoint of real qua real - the determinate negation of this representation - the real is not a pure 'gap' or negativity but a positivity, unassimilated (as of yet) to representation. Its paradigmatic form is that of trauma, as a sub-species of jouissance. Given that the real as 'gap' is constitutive of all discourse, establishing this gap in neuroscientific discourse achieves nothing further than establishing that one triangle, like all triangles possesses three sides, and does not indicate any particular affinity for elucidation of the real.

The results of these gross distortions of Freudian and Lacanian theory are not edifying. Solms' view is that feelings indicate unmet needs and thus prediction errors, which firstly, reduces affects to mere data points, and second, eliminates the possibility that, no matter what 'needs' are supposedly going unmet, the fact of the affect's very existence can be a demonstration of jouissance. One has to be dealing with a subject radically different to that of psychoanalysis to imagine that individuals cannot self-induce a range of affects for their own satisfaction, from guilt, to shame, to stupefaction or disgust, and that, far from doing this out of cognitive error, are a result of the subject knowing very precisely what he or she is doing. Psychoanalysis, properly speaking, does not deal with 'disorder', still less disorders of 'unmet needs'. That is the aim of social hygienists. Rather, psychoanalysis deals with orders of jouissance, notwithstanding that these orders appear 'dysfunctional' from the false perspective of cognitivism, or from the perspective of 'mastery' found within Aristotelian ethics<sup>2</sup> and its descendants.

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<sup>2</sup> The reference to Aristotle's ethics is particularly pertinent here, given that Lacan explicitly rejects the possibility of such mastery in the seminar on ethics. Naturally, Solms (2020) does not hesitate to speak uncritically of a 'mastery' of the drives in his

## The Ethics of Psychoanalysis

It is not for nothing that I have referred to Lacan's seminar on ethics several times already. Neuroscience is a discipline which seeks to acquire knowledge about the brain. It is no enemy of psychoanalysis, and there is no reason for psychoanalysts to oppose it. Neuropsychanalysis, on the other hand, is not merely an accumulation of knowledge, but an attempt at a praxis. Considering the very clear limitations of attempting to filter psychoanalytic theory through brain discourse, it remains an open question as to why anybody would bother doing it. Why should anybody bother trying to 'substantialise' Freudian-Lacanian drives, to ontologise via the MRI that which the analyst and analysand encounter exclusively via discourse? From what I can gather from the literature, there seem to be at least two prominent reasons. The first boils down to an efficiency motive, namely, that if psychoanalysis is informed of neuroscientific discourse, analysts will be able to perform their clinical work with greater speed and precision. The second justification for neuropsychanalysis seems to be the lure of scientific prestige that psychoanalysis might acquire through marriage to an 'empirical' discipline.

Both justifications are deeply concerning. The aim of greater efficiency presumes a more or less fixed process and set of goals for clinical psychoanalysis. Obviously, it is perfectly consistent with Solms' theory that 'dysfunction' derives from subjects' misapplication of knowledge to their 'innate needs', but to anybody for whom psychoanalysis is more than the implementation of societal hegemony, there are grounds for alarm. A didactic and disciplinary procedure in which a lackless 'expert' teaches subjects the proper use of their speaking body is intrinsically authoritarian, whatever the supposedly benevolent intent. It is perplexing that Dall'Aglio (2020) should encourage the unity of Lacanian psychoanalysis and neuroscience in order to assist the former in entering 'mental health discourse', given that one of the principal virtues of Lacanian psychoanalysis is that it explicitly rejects such

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papers. In the paper above, he distinguishes between 'bodily' drives - 'easily mastered' - and 'emotional drives' - which require 'learning' to 'master'. One can only achieve such a distinction by implicitly assuming a primarily cognitive subject who is then compartmentalised, and this compartmentalisation, forgets the Freudian point that a drive is always both 'bodily' and 'emotional'.

discourse. What Solms and Dall'Aglio are championing is what Lacan formulated as the discourse of the university, and it is a discourse in which 'knowledge' may be the master signifier, but power is its method, and assimilation its aim. The challenge for psychoanalysts of every persuasion is not to reject science per se, but to radically resist insertion and capture into such a discourse. This challenge is failed by neuropsychanalysis from the outset. 'Science' functions here as a guarantor for what would otherwise be straightforward biopolitics.

The aim of 'substantialising' or ontologising psychoanalytic notions by way of the MRI disavows the fact that for Lacan - and I would argue for Freud also, in his own way - ethics precedes ontology. Psychoanalysis cannot learn from neuropsychanalysis not because of ontological or epistemological reasons, but ethical ones. Thus, when Solms (2019) affirms that 'the main purpose of psychological treatment, then, is to help patients learn better ways of meeting their needs', one should ask why it is that the position of analyst has suddenly been transmogrified into that of educator, working with subject's 'needs' (i.e. subjects shorn of both desire and jouissance), whose governmentality is backed by the authority of scientific discourse, the second of the motivations listed above. Dall'Aglio's passage on the superego is especially pertinent here, but not for the reasons that he believes. It is not only the analysand who may fall victim to his or her own sadistic superego, but more significantly, the neuropsychanalyst with his or her superego of the gaze, addiction to efficiency and measurement in the name of a debauched version of 'science'. Proceeding with Kantian morality, the neuropsychanalyst is authorised to think him or herself free of 'pathological' motives, which have since been cleansed in the Lethe of faux-scientificity, and can proceed accordingly to the relentless normalisation of subjects. The analytic interpretation, the analytic act, are inherently risky; this risk cannot be ameliorated by adherence to quasi-scientific protocols or a standardisation of speech. The notion of interpretation as principally educative is itself at a vast distance of what Lacan proposed for analytic intervention. Lacan repeated on multiple occasions that psychoanalysis had a relation to science, but was not itself a science, and it is doubtful whether concepts such as 'unconscious', 'transference', 'repetition', etc, have any 'objective' scientific status outside of clinical praxis, which is less a failing of clinical praxis and more that of 'science'. Fundamentally, Solms' project rests on bad theory - a venal sin, to be sure - but it is at the service of



ethical monstrosity. It unwittingly repeats the very worst aspects of psychoanalysis that Lacan spent the 1950s critiquing.

To conclude, therefore, the neuroscientists are not enemies of psychoanalysis, and need not be avoided by the latter. The range of disciplines relevant to psychoanalysis is vast, and possibly infinite, but several are more worth of integration into analysis than the brain sciences, including, in no particular order, the study of Pythagorean number mysticism; feminine sexual fantasy and *jouissance*; the aphorisms of LaRochefoucauld and Baltasar Gracián; dialectic (ancient Chinese, Platonic, Hegelian and Marxist); traditions of *vendetta* and *omertá* in Sicily and Corsica; poetry from the late T'ang dynasty and adjacent periods; the ecstasies of Santa Teresa de Avila; Frege; the poetry of Callimachus, Catullus and Sappho; the theme of symbolic paternity as developed through Roman parental adoption schemes and Irish tanistry; Joyce; malediction and apotropaic devices of the Mediterranean and Middle East; Khlebnikov in the original Russian; marital and trade relations in precolonial Australian indigenous groups; set theory; psychoanalytic theory; the dream sequences of Fyodor Dostoevsky; the phobias of Ernest Hemingway; the metonymic details of Leo Tolstoy; the abjections of Clarice Lispector; sexuation among the sworn virgins of Albanian hill tribes; the aesthetic theories of Marcel Duchamp. This list is Eurocentric, of course, and is not, and cannot be complete. Those more learned than I can add to it. But, for the love of psychoanalysis, do not venture into neuropsychanalysis as, despite its progenitors' intent, it is radically opposed to the idiosyncratic spirit of psychoanalysis. At best, *pace* Nietzsche, it holds the same value as a chemical analysis of water does for the boatman facing a storm. At worst, it constitutes the analyst as learned policeman, promoting a practice that, in Lacan's (1990, p. 103) terms, is 'conformist in its aims, barbarous in its doctrine'.

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