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## CONVERSING DOES NOT CONSTITUTE NEED: THE CASE OF PSYCHOANALYSIS AND ITS RELATIONSHIP TO NEUROSCIENCE<sup>1</sup>

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‘That knowledge is conceived in the hot  
womb of violence ...’  
‘Oxford’  
W.H. Auden (2004)

The question of whether psychoanalysis and the neurosciences need each other is often posed in the scientific literature, but never adequately resolved. Publications by a variety of authors, amongst them Mark Solms & Oliver Turnbull (2002), Eric Kandel (1999), Regina Pally (2000) and others, as well as ongoing debates in learned journals including *Neuropsychoanalysis* attest to this – even the theme of the 10<sup>th</sup> International Neuropsychoanalysis Congress in Paris was a variation on this very topic. As most contributions to the ongoing debate tend to be in favor of need, the position I would like to advance in this paper, is the defense of the autonomy of psychoanalysis i.e. to present psychoanalysis as an independent, stand-alone discipline, *inter pares* with every other discipline including neuroscience, and not in need of any one of them. The proposition that psychoanalysis is the science of subjectivity, has been widely promoted and acknowledged. As such, the specific *aporia* to which psychoanalysis seeks to find answers, can best be expressed as: what sort of an experience is it, to be this particular “I” that I am in this world, and in relation to other “I’s” around me, most particularly, I-in-pain and I-in-desire ? This fact puts the issues of investigating the workings of the mind, the economy of the psychic apparatus or even the structure and nature of the entity we call *the Unconscious*, to a rather subsidiary, second-order position. When Kant says: “such an intelligence as is ours, can know itself only as it appears to itself in respect of an intuition which is not intellectual and thus cannot be given by reasoning itself” (Kant

1953: 159), he is estimating the age old truth – already mentioned by Socrates who maintained that a soul can only be known by another soul – that a subject can only be investigated by another subject. Contemporary equivalents of this notion, according to which, *ipseity* is considered as being dependent on *alterity*, can be found in the arguments of Levinas (1974: 214-19) who suggests that *subjectivity is ultimately a question of subjection to the responsibility that one is charged with, by the Other*. After such repeated assertions, how can an impersonal abstraction suffice? One is thus inevitably led to the traditional division in epistemology between disciplines that offer explanation (in B. Russell’s (1910) terms ‘knowledge by description’), i.e. a causality sequence that produces knowledge of its object from without, and the disciplines that offer *understanding* (in B. Russell’s terms ‘knowledge by acquaintance’) i.e. a knowledge from within, which can be achieved through a degree of empathic identification so that through a co-living and re-living, some degree of grasping of the interconnections within the coherent body of meaning of the experience of the Other, is made possible. As Hans Gadamer has put it, “understanding is always the fusion of two subjective horizons, supposedly existing in themselves” (Weinsheimer 1985: 183). What I am trying to say is that we are dealing with two entirely different orders of methodology and thus different system levels of truth about the human condition. The notion of psychoanalysis achieving the objectivity of a hard science, apart from being futile, comes under the category of “scientific self-misunderstanding” according to Habermas (1987: 265). Equally, the notion of a “unified science” that will combine various discrepant disciplines under one roof, that too, has been shown to be nothing more than a myth (Hampe 2003).

### *Establishing the psychoanalytic method*

In 1922, Freud describes psychoanalysis as a procedure of investigation, a treatment method, and a theory based on the information discovered by this investigation (Freud 1922). Psychoanalysis as an investigation has an object and a methodology. If the methodology is as I’ve described above, and the object is the “I” in the human condition of the analysand, then our focus of study is none other than the “analytic situation” itself – that ever transforming mixture of the conscious and the unconscious realm, as they

manifest themselves within the unique condition of an intersubjective field, whose aim is the creation of special personal truths that have been given the name “the analytic third” (Ogden 1994). At the same time, we cannot but acknowledge the unnerving truth, that work with an analysand is perhaps always to some extent, an attempt on the part of the analyst to carry the work of his own analysis further than the point to which his own analyst could get him. As one author has put it “... the analysis progressively defines the issues to be analyzed whilst analyzing them” (Schafer 1979: 21).

It is the firm contention of psychoanalysis therefore, that human experience can only be understood through internal not external relationships, not contingent, associative relationships between distinct elements whose significance is ascribed in advance, but through mutually implicative holistic structures in which the very meaning of the elements, is constituted by their relationship with each other. In the same vein, it is suggested that past events and experiences retain a grip on subjectivity, by structuring all present attitudes and prospects towards the future, whilst at the same time this same past is molded by the subject’s present attitudes and prospects. Even though these latter do themselves derive from and express the past, yet they also have retroactive effects *on* this same past, through the selection of what is going to be illuminated and what obscured. In other words, progressive and regressive movements take place concurrently and condition each other reciprocally. Freud’s holographic image of Rome, where no edifice that had ever come into existence will have passed away, where the earliest phases of development of the urban landscape would continue to exist alongside the latest ones – as if superimposed on one another, can only be approached by another subject who alone, can cope with the confusion that such an encounter engenders. As the philosopher Merleau-Ponty writes : “... there is in human existence a principle of indeterminacy, and this indeterminacy is not only for us, it does not stem from some imperfection of our knowledge...existence is indeterminate in itself, by reason of its fundamental structure” (1962: 169). As a result, in order to focus on the intersubjective knowing that will materialize from the haze of the analytic act, one has to momentarily obliterate all traces of objective causal knowing. The *fundamental rule* with its twin components i.e. *free association* and *free floating attention*, formulates the imperative of loose abandonment into the realm of non-rationality, disconnected from the order of cause-effect reasoning,

so that the so called “*otherness-within*” can find its way to the surface, thereby de-centering the hegemony of conscious selfhood. Or put differently, psychoanalysis is not interested so much in restoring a veridical account of a past moment, but takes as its main concern, the very mechanisms of distortion both within and outside language, but only expressed through it, as they are lived within the confines of the analytic situation.

Coming now to the notion of treatment, the second aspect of Freud’s definition, I would like to start with a recourse to etymology. Dictionaries tell us that the word therapy/therapist derives from an old indo-european root that refers to a warrior’s helper or adjutant, someone who tends to the weapons, the armour, the chariot, and helps prepare his master for battle. Hence we can think of the therapy aspect of psychoanalysis, as being closer to this ancient meaning, rather than what modern medicine means by the word. It is not the elimination of symptoms, nor is it a return to the very homeostasis of a status-quo-ante or even to a near approximation of it. Treatment or psychic change in psychoanalysis – made possible only through the presence of the adjutant – has to be conceived of, as a transformation, as a creation of a new, as yet unknown structure that will promote an as yet unthought of coherence of meaning and consistency of self, thereby increasing the freedom of the symbolization processes, as well as facilitating the self-reflection which will in turn enhance further reparative moves and the re-constitution of parts long lost to the self. The tools for this treatment process have been conceptualized as that meticulous working through, that has been given the name “*work of mourning*” with its variety of intricate internalization processes, which can only emerge within the envelope of a bi-personal mutually reflective analytic field, couched as it is, within that unique analytic frame which generates a separate-level-reality. It appears to get engendered from that formal response by the analyst, which promotes the fact that the analysand has been in the presence of an adjutant that Christopher Bollas has called “the Other as process” (1998: 31), an experience that is, which through the destruction yet survival of the other, develops the ultimate *capacity to be alone*.

Through the employment of well-known Aristotelian concepts, the contemporary philosopher-psychoanalyst Jonathan Lear, makes the claim that whereas psychoanalysis as process (*κίνησις/kinesis*) attempts to abate subjective distress, psychoanalysis as activity (*ενέργεια/energeia*) aims at its own activity, i.e. “self-consciousness

appropriating and finding creative ways of living with [*ομοφωνείν/speaking the same voice*] the creations of one's own unconscious/non-rational mental activity". In other words, Lear makes the rather bold claim that "the aim of psychoanalysis is psychoanalysis." (Lear 2014: 690)

If a parallel from medicine is needed, a rather inadequate approximation would be immunization, a process of painstaking incorporation, with a view to the development of more mature encounters with the psychic vicissitudes to come.

### *The neuroscientific perspective*

Our colleagues in the neurosciences, whilst fully recognizing the object of our discipline and the enormous differences that exist between them and us in methodology, stance, procedures and essence of outcomes, still offer a compromise theory for our perusal. Leaning on the long philosophical tradition of addressing the mind-body problem in terms of dual-aspect theories (i.e. the works of Strawson (1994), Davidson (2001), O'Shaughnessy (2008) and others), this theory that bears the seductive name "Dual-Aspect Monism" and which claims – if I understand it properly – that them and us attempt to investigate the same entity, albeit from a different perspective, thus ending up with discrepant appellations and conceptualizations for essentially the very same things. (Solms & Turnbull 2002: *passim*):

- where Psychoanalysis talks of consciousness and psychic processes, neuroscience talks of brain structures, neuronal pathways and webs of connections
- where Psychoanalysis talks of remembering, repeating and working through, our colleagues talk of procedural and declarative memory systems, and use-dependant activation of networks
- where Psychoanalysis talks of transference and transference enactment, our colleagues talk of connectionist neuronal pathways

- where Psychoanalysis talks of identity of perception, our colleagues talk of perseveration in neuronal activity, irrespective of alterations in the external stimuli (e.g. visual pathways)
- where Psychoanalysis talks of identification or empathy, neuroscience talks of processes involving mirror cells activity
- where Psychoanalysis talks of narcissism, introjects, part objects etc., our colleagues talk of imprints, attachment patterns etc.
- where Psychoanalysis talks of masochism, dependency and cathexis on exciting and rejecting objects, neuroscience points to the commonality of circuitry located in the nucleus accumbens, for affective bonding / reward processes and addictive behaviour processes, and impresses upon us the observation that when the above circuitry is activated by experiences of love (be it romantic or maternal) there is a concurrent de-activation of the circuitry for accurate evaluation of the emotional state and the intentionality in the Other, i.e. the mentalization circuitry
- where Psychoanalysis talks of memory traces and of the “unthought known”, our colleagues remind us that one can have poor conscious memory of a traumatic event, yet at the same time the amygdala retains powerful implicit emotional traces outside the realm of consciousness.

This is all highly intriguing! One is thrilled to hear a sister discipline interpret impersonal raw data, through the use of anthropomorphic conceptualizations reminiscent of psychic determinants and dynamic structures. Undoubtedly one wants to hear more. When we, in psychoanalysis struggle with the essential unattainability of empathy it is a pleasant surprise to hear our colleagues suggest that because an observed experience and a lived one seem to utilize the same brain regions (the same areas light up in the fMRI) and perhaps the same neuronal pathways, it may be impossible for anyone to distinguish between *putting myself in someone else's shoes*, from *putting myself in someone else's shoes*. What our colleagues, in their language are saying, is what both philosophers and psychoanalysts have been saying for ages, i.e. that the Other is by definition unknowable

to us. How does one explain this confluence of perspectives, are we observing their data, or are they using our interpretive paradigm?

At this point the Dual-Aspect Monism theory steps in, with its legitimate assertion that every subjective experience correlates to a series of neurochemical processes, which then leads to the intimation that the more we might know about the latter, the better and more valid our understanding of the former will be!

No one doubts the assertion, but a) the key word is correlates, not “is identical to” (as a simplistic reading of the Dual-Aspect Monism theory might lead one to believe) , nor is the correlation necessarily a causal one, and b) how does one lend credence to the interpretive tools used to make sense of the raw data. As Levine (1983) has posited some time ago, there is an “explanatory gap” between function of the brain neural mechanisms and human experience, one that so far has not been bridged. In fact Freud himself – who has defined consciousness as *the sense organ of psychic qualities* (Bion 1962: 53) – refers to such a gap when he writes “... everything that lies between [the brain and the acts of consciousness] is unknown, and the data do not include any direct relation between these two terminal points of our knowledge” (Freud 1938: 144). The various neurobiological theories of subjective consciousness (i.e. the one by Crick & Koch [1990]) regularly start by assuming a connection between neuronal information binding and subjective experience, so therefore are unable to actually bridge the aforementioned explanatory gap. The conceptual obstacle is that explanation of functions as well as various other reductive accounts, do not suffice for the explanation of experience, however advanced the neuroscientific investigations may be. The structure and function of physical processes yield only more structures and functions, consequently all we can expect these processes to explain is more structures and functions. Facts about subjective experience – what T. Nagel (1974) has aptly called the “*what it is like*” – can in no way, be conceptualized as automatic consequences of any physical account. Given that it is theoretically coherent, that any given process could in fact exist without experience, experience has to be envisaged as not being entailed by the physical. Colin McGinn has gone so far as to suggest an insurmountable impasse, when he stated that the human capacity to bridge the explanatory gap is “cognitively closed to this phenomenon”. (1989: 356) It is not difficult to see that a fundamental tenet of the Dual-Aspect Monism

theory, i.e. that the object of study for psychoanalysis and the neurosciences is in fact a monism (one single phenomenon with two different aspects) is therewith put seriously into doubt.

Psychoanalysis is in no position to delve into the objections raised within the neuroscientific community regarding the *falsifiability* of the methodology used, i.e. the verifiability of the evidence employed for the more abstract conjectures drawn from the accumulated data, but one would question the monism aspect, the identity premise of the theory. Are Psychoanalysis and neuroscience truly investigating the same area of concern? Of course every psychic event correlates to cellular and neurochemical processes that we cannot be aware of, but the chasm that exists between cells firing and producing consciousness and a consciousness that has itself the awareness of being conscious, requires a leap that has yet to be accomplished – if ever. What neurophysiological substrate – however complex – could possibly adequately explain or indeed be equated to such private states of *extended consciousness* like a sense of responsibility or a sense of justice or say, faith?

Poetry and linguistics may both be dealing with language, its qualities, its rules, its wealthy potential and its limits, but to claim that what exists between them, is a dual-aspect monism, is – I would contend – a matter of missing the point. The elemental distinction put forward by the philosopher Daniel Dennett (1969) between *personal* and *subpersonal* explanation, renders the prospect of a unified conceptualization incorporating both mental-subjective processes and cerebral-objective processes in a single paradigm, or indeed the establishment of links of causality between them, inherently contradictory.

### *The clinical aspect*

Let me give another example: An analysand who comes and says that for some years now, she feels she's not herself. Amidst palpable anxiety and endless tears, she tells me that something is happening to her and that she feels that she is no longer herself. "I hear myself and my voice is not mine, I look myself in the mirror and what I see, I cannot recognize as me. I lead a life that is all pretense, what is happening to me? My neurology



colleagues would, I suspect, diagnose some form of agnosia, somatagnosia or prosopagnosia etc. and attempt to locate the lesion – they may even be successful in pinpointing it on a screen. Equally, my psychiatry colleagues would, I expect, think of the DSM IV criteria for Dissociative Disorder and categorize this woman under the “difficult to treat” section – they may even prescribe a variety of medications. My predicament however is altogether different. I shall be spending the next so many years – an hour a day, four days per week, in the same room with this woman, trying together with her, to give meaning and coherence to this extraordinary, terrifying experience that we will be somehow sharing. Is my colleagues’ contribution helpful to me? I would hazard a meek *possibly*. Do I consider their contribution a necessity for my work? The answer is a most definite, no!

#### *Drawing tentative conclusions*

We know since Gödel (Feferman 1986) that no system can find its definitive validation from within itself. But then we in Psychoanalysis, are not in search of definitive validations. We are in full cognizance that any instance of insight, by shedding light and clarity on one spot, creates a multitude of dark spots and penumbræ around it. If physics has its “Uncertainty Principle” – where any moment of truth is always and inevitably partial and expressed only in terms of approximations, so the subjective study of human self experience has, what has been termed, its “eternal penultimacy” (Ryle 1963: 186), a kind of ... *being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without the irritable reaching after fact and reason...* To this, a poet, has given the name *Negative Capability* (Keats 1899: 277).

Does psychoanalysis need neuroscience, was the question posed. My answer would be that psychoanalysis welcomes the dialogue and exchange of ideas with all sister disciplines, from cognitive science, neuroscience and ethology, all the way to philosophy, social sciences and literature, because they are mutually enriching. But if we are talking about need, in an attempt to acquire legitimacy, then the answer I’m afraid, is a most intrepid, no! Doubts, even attacks on the legitimacy of psychoanalysis have been raised

from many quarters over the years: starting with Karl Popper (2002) and Sir Peter Medawar (1972), and going on to Adolf Grünbaum (1992), and Frederick Crews (1997), all the way to the most recent polemic by Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen (2011). Despite these repeated challenges, it is my contention, that the neurosciences, however informative and thought provoking, can in no way act as psychoanalysis' defense against them.

Psychoanalysis has to go it alone. What psychoanalysis needs is its lacunae, its mysteries, its unknowns, without which it couldn't remain true to the human condition, whose *truth* – as suggested by the poet W. H. Auden (2004) – *is a silence to which our words can only point, but cannot ever utter*, or to quote Winnicott, in psychoanalysis “ ... if we succeed, we do so by failing – failing the patient's way” (Winnicott 1963: 258). Thus psychoanalysis stays loyal to its current status which is best expressed by Blaise Pascal, who wrote for a different context : “... there is enough light there, for those who wish to see, and enough darkness for those who have the opposite disposition” (Pascal, 1670).

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#### Notes

1. An earlier version of this paper was presented on the panel entitled “Do Psychoanalysis and Neuroscience need each other?” at the 13<sup>th</sup> International Congress of Neuropsychoanalysis, held in Athens in June 2012.

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