

Correspondence

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I coined the term neuropsychanalysis in 1999 not to give psychoanalysis 'a fashionable prefix' but to describe the efforts of a group of scientists attempting to integrate our findings on the same part of nature, derived from different viewpoints. We believed integration was necessary because the capacity of the brain to feel subjective states has significant implications for how it works; feelings have causal effects and mean something. Freud was not the only scientist to explore this perspective, but he did so more systematically than anyone before him. The resulting body of hypotheses is called psychoanalysis. The advent of neuropsychanalysis coincided with the emergence of new methods capable of correlating hypotheses derived from the objective and subjective perspectives, and thereby correcting viewpoint-dependent errors. Ramus¹ suggests that this might be 'dangerous' for three reasons.

First, Freud's hypotheses (e.g. the unconscious, the ego/id dichotomy) were 'borrowed shamelessly from predecessors without credit' (e.g. Janet and Plato). The historical precursors of ideas are irrelevant to their scientific value. We use psychoanalytic ideas as the starting point of our investigations for the reason Kandel cited: taken as a whole they still represent 'the most coherent and intellectually satisfying view of the mind' that we have (p. 505).²

Second, 'The case for the importance of a cognitive level of description for any proper understanding of the mind/brain, and for its conceptual independence from the biological level has already been made long ago.' Ramus must surely concede that the claims of psychoanalysis are different from those of cognitive psychology. But he goes further: 'Psychoanalysis is not just a harmless set of ideas'. Many hypotheses and treatments in biological psychiatry were considered dangerous (e.g. opiates, frontal lobotomy), and many regrettable practices are perpetrated in its name. That is not a good reason to decry the future development of psychopharmacology or psychosurgery. The exclusion on moral grounds of certain 'schools' is a slippery slope in science. Competing claims must be contested empirically, with ethical abuses being handled by the appropriate review boards.

Third, 'It is not enough for empirical research to tackle the influence of early life experiences, the neural correlates of unconscious processing, or the decoding of dream content using neuroimaging, to support psychoanalysis as such, even if Freud happened to use the same words'. As Guterl once wrote, in a popular context: 'It's not a matter of proving Freud wrong or right, but of finishing the job' (p. 51).³ Neuropsychanalysts will readily agree that 'what is needed is to show that certain central psychoanalytical concepts [...] can now be sufficiently precisely defined to make clear, testable predictions, that some of these predictions are indeed correct, and that they are not better explained by other, simpler theories'. That is precisely what we are doing; and we call it psychoanalysis.

I am not sure whether Ramus will be amused to know that neuropsychanalysis has been similarly criticised by

psychoanalysts, decrying the supposed dangers of neuroscience (e.g. Blass & Carmeli⁴).

- 1 Ramus F. What's the point of neuropsychanalysis? *Br J Psychiatry* 2013; **203**: 170–1.
- 2 Kandel E. Biology and the future of psychoanalysis: A new intellectual framework for psychiatry revisited. *Am J Psychiatry* 1999; **156**: 505–24.
- 3 Guterl F. What Freud got right. *Newsweek* 2002; 11 November: 50–1.
- 4 Blass R, Carmeli Z. The case against neuropsychanalysis: On fallacies underlying psychoanalysis's latest scientific trend and its negative impact on psychoanalytic discourse. *Int J Psychoanalysis* 2007; **88**: 19–40.

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In Ramus's¹ enthusiasm to rid himself of Franco–Freudian bath-water and champion what he rather blandly calls 'psychology', he has jettisoned a lusty baby. It is precisely the superficiality of much of academic psychology that draws neuroscientists to psychoanalysis, in their search for models of the mind compatible with brain science. The central focus of psychoanalysis is the development and vicissitudes of intimate relationships: parent–child, adult–adult, therapist–patient. Relational neuroscience brings together insights from psychoanalysis and neuroscience, clarifying and deepening understanding in both fields. Here are three brief examples. Strathearn *et al*² show how insecurely attached mothers respond to images of their crying babies with activation of brain areas associated with disgust rather than care, compared with their securely attached counterparts. Coan *et al*'s³ functional magnetic resonance imaging study of married couples illustrates how holding a loved-one's hand mitigates the impact of anticipated threat, with reduced need for self-oriented defensiveness as manifest by less activation of the anterior insula and superior frontal gyrus. Carhart-Harris *et al*'s⁴ finding of activation of Cg25 region of the cingulate gyrus in profound depression is consistent with the idea of an interpersonally isolated and punitive superego desperately trying to prevent overwhelming Pankseppian modalities impulses of panic and rage from reaching consciousness.⁵ All three examples suggest the profoundly interpersonal aspect of affect regulation, implicit in psychoanalytic theories, and that the capacity to experience, tolerate and integrate negative emotions with the help of a loved other is a mark of psychological health, as well as being a goal for psychotherapeutic treatment of depression and anxiety.

In Whitehead's aphorism, 'a science which hesitates to forget its founders is lost'. We need to be able to kill the fathers; but it is equally important to honour them. The task of today's psychoanalysts is to sift the gold from the dross in Freud and his successors' ideas. Paradigm shift instigators like Freud may be argued with, superseded at times, but never forgotten. We are still 'Darwinians', despite the fact that Darwin had no model of DNA to help him explain how acquired characteristics were transmitted across the generations. Modern genetics, through technical and conceptual innovation, reveals the mechanisms by which evolutionary change comes about. Similarly, contemporary neuroscience helps unravel the brain patterns which underlie some of Freud's pioneering insights. These include: the fragility of the ego compared with the pulsive power of midbrain and limbic structures; the drawbacks – in terms of energetic overload and sequestration from learned experience – of self-oriented rather than interpersonal defences, preventing impulses from the limbic system from reaching the prefrontal cortex; how top-down regulation (mentalising), fostered by therapy, can mitigate self-destructive impulses 'from