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COMMENTARY



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ABSTRACT

Solms' unusual project of translating Freud's "Project for a Scientific Psychology" into contemporary cognitive science terms is hard to assess. The most important theme, to my way of thinking, is Solms' support, in present-day terms, of Freud's insistence that emotion lies at the heart of all cognition. Taking this one idea seriously will require significant alterations to the working assumptions of many in cognitive science.

KEYWORDS

Freud; Borges; translation; affect; free energy principle

In "Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote," Borges (1962) tells the fanciful tale of a literary theorist who sets out to compose (not copy, not write from memory) Cervantes' great work anew in the twentieth century. This will be an act of bizarre self-control, since Menard is a Cervantes scholar who no doubt has at least large portions of the text of *Don Quixote* committed to memory, but Menard is determined to bracket that memory and create, with his own authorial intentions, all of Cervantes' sentences anew, like an experienced wheelwright setting out to reinvent the wheel! He "succeeds" in his literally quixotic quest (though how can he tell?), and Borges tells us: "Cervantes' text and Menard's are verbally identical, but the second is almost infinitely richer" (1962, p. 42). Another quixotic quest would be to rewrite Freud's "Project for a Scientific Psychology" in twenty-first century scientific English, taking advantage of numerous advances in cognitive science that have followed in Freud's wake, and that is Mark Solms' project. Questions press in: Why would he want to do this? What would success be? Does he manage in any case to do something thought-provoking and valuable? The answer to this last question is definitely Yes.

But what is the point? Let's clear away some poor ideas and see what's left. Some of my favorite moments as a philosopher have been finding early anticipations of today's hot topics, usually couched in quaint verbiage (from our perspective), but clearly discernible thanks to the hindsight provided by the advances we've made. But what should we make of such moments? Should we say that Aristotle or Hume – if you squint just right – figured out game theory or

statistics or evolution by natural selection many centuries ago? Or just that they had half-expressed hunches that we can retrospectively reconstruct into insights that they themselves would be unlikely to endorse or even understand? Alfred Whitehead (1929) once famously opined that "The safest general characterization of the European philosophical tradition is that it consists of a series of footnotes to Plato" (p. 39), an interesting exaggeration. Once you understand the works of later philosophers as articulated in their own terms, you can use that understanding to discover the more or less inadvertent hints hidden in Plato, and as philosophy carries on into today's enriched conceptual schemes, new perspectives will no doubt be constructed that shed further light on the pioneering groping of the pioneers, as they hovered in the vicinity of treasures we have since uncovered.

The same phenomenon can be seen in the sciences. Go back and read Ross Ashby's *Design for a Brain* (1952) or J. Z. Young's *A Model of the Brain* (1964), for instance, and marvel at the unheralded insights buried in their efforts. We have cleared away some of the fog and ideology that confronted earlier theorists, and developed a large kit of thinking tools – words and systems and models – for articulating different possibilities barely discernible to them. I am duly impressed by the progress they made given their relatively impoverished data sets, experimental paradigms and concepts, but I would not think it a valuable labor to translate their books into today's terms. Mark Solms thinks updating Freud is worth the tremendous effort, and he may be right, but I am not the one to judge. The only way to do this right, I've come to realize, is to put the original

German beside you as you read Solms' version (and the very useful "tracked changes" file comparing Solms with the English original) (<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/suppl/10.1080/15294145.2020.1833361>). I've done only a tiny fraction of this labor (it seems that Acrobat won't let me put the three pdfs side-by-side and I'm far from any library where I can get my hands on a hard copy of *Entwurf einer Psychologie*). I did enough cross-checking to convince me that he's done an honest job but it would take me months to get inside the project the way Solms has. So I will have to settle for some tentative impressions.

Solms thinks Freud got a lot of things right that we have largely forgotten or never understood in the first place. So he thinks that it is not just of historical interest, or a corrective to our whiggish pride in what we take to be *our* discoveries, to reintroduce Freud to us in today's scientific context. He thinks Freud will posthumously make a major contribution to cognitive science, and that this is a golden opportunity to dissolve the mutual disrespect and hostility that has reigned for decades between psychoanalysis and cognitive science. What I especially liked in my Solms-guided re-encounter with Freud (whose work I read avidly when I was an undergraduate in the early 60s) is Freud's attempt to put not just valence but something like anxiety or fear into every "decision" made by the brain. As Solms notes, Jaak Panksepp and Antonio Damasio have rightly stressed the centrality of "affect," but I don't see that in Karl Friston's free energy principle, except in the important fact that minimizing free energy is always the background task, sometimes urgent to the point of fatality, but always present, if not always nagging. The costs of doing whatever your mind is doing are perhaps best appreciated if

aggregated under the free energy principle. It is not just that it is hard to concentrate, or to keep certain issues *out* of your attention, when you are hungry or thirsty or in pain; it is also hard when you are uncertain, disoriented, or confronted with novelties you can't make sense of.

The business-like routines of most computational models of control, perception, memory and so forth entirely leave out this utterly central aspect of minds *and there is no chance of just hanging an emotions-bag on the side of the machine* and getting it to provide a handy source of affect. The computational models have to be rebuilt from the ground up. Freud's scouting of this territory is promising, and perhaps it is much more than promising, and perhaps attaching it to Bayesian networks, predictive coding, and the free energy principle will give it the bling to attract the brightest young thinkers coming along. That would be very good for cognitive science.

Disclosure statement

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