

From [Lost in Cognition: Psychoanalysis and the Cognitive Sciences : 2014 : Éric Laurent](#) : see [here](#)  
<http://www.lacanianworks.net/?p=10584>

Chapter 6 : The cul-de-sac of cognitive psychoanalysis : This paper was published in La Cause Freudienne, issue 60, June 2005, p17-22 (An earlier version of this article was translated into English by Lieve Billiet as “The Blind Alleys of Cognitive Psychoanalysis” in the Lacanian Review of Psychoanalysis, Issue 2)

Note : a PsyForum was held in Paris in March 2005 (probably – a computer crash has deleted my records, though I was there! JE).

---

**From:** NLS-Messenger2-owner@amp-nls.org [mailto:NLS-Messenger2-owner@amp-nls.org] **On Behalf Of** NLS - New Lacanian School  
**Sent:** 25 April 2005 08:17  
**To:** NLS-messenger2@amp-nls.org  
**Subject:** [NLS-Messenger] n°135 : Psy Forum, Eric Laurent

> NLS-Messenger > n°134  
> 24104105

[Liste d'informations de la New Lacanian School](#)  
[Informations list of the New Lacanian School](#)

The blind alleys of cognitive psychoanalysis  
Eric Laurent

Like neuro-psychoanalysis, that has its congresses, cognitive psychoanalysis is part of the impact that the neurosciences have on our discipline and on the way they are received. I make a distinction between the results of the neurosciences as such and the ways they are diffused in different psychoanalytical orientations. The examination

of this reception and “the abusive import of concepts” from the neurosciences, as Louis Althusser would have said, is the more important the more the interface between psychoanalysis and the neurosciences is extending. The last IPA Congress, in March in New Orleans, was marked by the presence of a distinguished guest, Professor Antonio Damasio, neuroscientist friendly to psychoanalysis. As Daniel Widlöcher says in the August 29<sup>th</sup> 2004 issue of *L'Express* : “The auditorium was full, and he received an ovation. It comes down to this that there are no difficulties between the ideas of Damasio and those of a psy”.<sup>[1]</sup>

The next IPA Congress on trauma as theme will take place in Brazil in July 2006 and will make a lot of room for the cognitive approach and for the contribution of neurosciences to psychoanalysis.<sup>[2]</sup> It will be possible for the participants to take part in the same period in the sixth International Congress of Neuro-Psychoanalysis on the theme of “Dream and Psychosis”. In the Lacanian movement, we witness similar strategies. An author recently published a work aiming at showing that psychoanalysis can be perfectly compatible with the neurosciences.<sup>[3]</sup> This agreement in principle, formulated otherwise, would have to be taken as good news. The scientific status of psychoanalysis would be confirmed by the possibility of translating its concepts and its experience into the terms of the neurosciences. The recognition that translation into the language of the neurosciences is now possible is not without consequences for psychoanalysis itself. I will examine these consequences with respect to three recognised interfaces: repression, the choice of the libidinal object, the dream. Then I will turn to the effects of the appeal to emotional cognitivism to account for affect and specifically anxiety in analytic experience. It provides evidence of a will to make exist a current of cognitivist psychoanalysis, completing the contemporary version of *ego-psychology*.

## A model of repression based on the will

In the January 9<sup>th</sup> 2004 issue of the review *Science*, a researcher in psychology at the University of Oregon, Michael Anderson, head of the research team at Stanford, announces that they have been able to identify the cerebral zones implied in conscious forgetting. No later than Friday the 22<sup>nd</sup> of January 2004, in the Science Section of *Le Monde*, we learn “that magnetic resonance imagery can visualise for us Freudian repression. Americans visualise voluntary forgetting.” I leave aside the problem of knowing whether Freudian repression is a “voluntary forgetting”. In the experiment, psychology students are asked to learn a pair of words with no relation between them. They are then asked to make an effort to forget one of the two when the other term of the couple is pronounced before them. The effort takes place under magnetic resonance. This is called: proposing a model of repression. During the repression phase, several prefrontal cortical zones, generally considered to be important for the control of voluntary movement, were active. The researchers conclude: “Thus, the current findings provide the first neurobiological model of the voluntary form of repression proposed by Freud, a model that integrates this otherwise controversial proposal with widely accepted and fundamental mechanisms for controlling behavior.” Michael Anderson, who studied the way ill-treated children repressed the memories of traumatising experiences, hopes the proposed model will lead to a better understanding of the capacity to resist post traumatic stress. The acceptance of this perspective implies a complete blackout on the nature of repression in psychoanalysis and the acceptance of the perspective of a therapy by the generalised wiping out of the contingencies of life. Psychoanalysis would then be completely replaced by a therapy of trauma.

## The dream fulfilling the reward of the limbic system

The dream is now indeed chosen to be the royal road to the wedding of psychoanalysis and neurology. Mark Solms, Professor of neurology and psychoanalyst at the same time and very influential in Great-Britain, is one of the representatives of the current of psychoanalyst-neurologist and has published recently a paper in *Scientific American* that gives a good notion of his position : “Recent neurological mapping generally correlates to Freud’s conception. The core brain stem and limbic system – responsible for the instincts and drives – roughly correspond to Freud’s id. The ventral frontal region, which controls selective inhibition, the dorsal frontal region, which controls self-conscious thought, and the posterior cortex, which represents the outside world, amount to the ego and the Super-Ego”.<sup>[4]</sup>

Dreams also bear witness to this new wedding. “Freud’s ideas are also reawakening in sleep and dream science. His dream theory – that nighttime visions are partial glimpses of unconscious wishes – was discredited when rapid-eye-movement (REM) sleep and its strong correlation with dreaming were discovered in the 1950s.” The first qualification was made referring to the automatism of REM sleep, a repetitive “random cortical activity”. But Solms goes on: “Freud’s view appeared to lose all credibility when investigators in the 1970s showed that the dream cycle was regulated by pervasive brain chemical acetylcholine, produced in a “mindless” part of the brain stem (...) But more recent work has revealed that dreaming and REM sleep are dissociable states, controlled by distinct, though interactive, mechanisms. Dreaming turns out to be generated by a network of structures centered on the forebrain’s instinctual-motivational circuitry”. The first result of Solms’ perspective is the fixation of the categories of the second

topic, by contenting oneself with the finding of their neuronal correlates. Proper psychoanalytical debate on the dangers of a mechanical interpretation of the second Freudian topic of the Ego, the Id and the Super Ego get stuck. It doesn't teach psychoanalysts anything new, and it doesn't throw a new light on their practice. It merely can lighten their feeling of guilt for not being scientists in the sense of the neurosciences.

### Two modes of love, rewards of the limbic brain

In a paper recently published in the revue *NeuroImage*, under the title "The neural correlates of maternal and romantic love", Andréas Bartels and Semir Zeki, neurologists working at University College London, have used magnetic resonance "to measure brain activity in mothers while they viewed pictures of their own and of acquainted children, and of their best friend and of acquainted adults as additional controls. The activity specific to maternal attachment was compared to that associated to romantic love...". The first goal of the study is thus to give a neurological base to the difference between 'romantic' love, that is of sexual nature, and maternal love. At first one could say that this is a translation in neuronal terms of the difference between woman and mother. But the study goes on in a more ambitious way and takes into account the neurotransmitters proper to each attachment mechanism. "Both types of attachment activated regions specific to each, as well as overlapping regions in the brain's reward system that coincide with areas rich in oxytocin and vasopressin receptors".

Whereupon the authors propose a theory of love that, as Solms said, harmonizes with Freudian theories. They translate into neuronal terms the transgression of social prohibitions that being in love and maternal love make possible. Both attachments "deactivated a common set of

regions associated with negative emotions, social judgement and 'mentalizing', that is, the assessment of other people's intentions and emotions. We conclude that human attachment employs a push-pull mechanism that overcomes social distance by deactivating networks used for critical social assessment and negative emotions, while it bonds individuals through the involvement of the reward circuitry, explaining the power of love to motivate and exhilarate".<sup>[5]</sup> These works of Bartels and Zeki of University College London, are in the line of a more comprehensive current that was called « biology in search of the conquest of love » in a recent dossier of the CNRS (Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique).

Olivier Postel-Vinay, scientific journalist of "La Recherche" presents us what is at stake in these studies in the issue of November 2004. He starts from other studies on the role of neurotransmitters in the attachment mode of field mice. "Although in a more diffused way, we find within man the organic relation observed in field mice between maternal attachment and attachment to a partner. The same couple of neurotransmitters is implied to a different extent in the two modes of attachment. More precisely in an area highly active in maternal love, but not in romantic love: the grey periaqueducal substance".<sup>[6]</sup>

Anxious to draw ample lessons from this new "biology of love", he goes further than the scientists of University College: "The concept of attachment ... accounts for the formation of social bonds ... of attachment between friends, of what Christians call love of one's fellow-creature ... these different works make the dissociation between attachment and sexual relation possible ...".<sup>[7]</sup>

We thus come to a scientific foundation of the theory of the social bond as "agape", distinguished from the sexual. Within this perspective, the main point is to replace jouissance by "reward". The formation of the social bond can then be understood as a process of

reinforcement of the reward system. “According to L. Young ‘oxytocin and vasopressin can increase the hedonistic value of social interactions by activating the neuronal circuit implied in reward and reinforcement.’ At the same time one can see an analogy with drugs, which leads many scientists to explore the relation between drugs and attachment, including love. From the syndrome of deprivation to “I miss you”, the step is quickly taken”.<sup>[8]</sup>

The operation of replacing sexual jouissance by reward makes it possible to line up maternal attachment with Christian “agape” by founding it on a “reward” system instead of a sublimation. The outcome of this is not only the foundation of the Christian imperative concerning love of the neighbour, but also of the Christian truth for which the foundation of the social bond is love of the Virgin, mother of the divine child.

Freud considered the Christian imperative of love of the neighbour as criminal, as rather what one can find on the most profound level as hate of oneself. The denial of this primordial “depressive” reaction by emphasising reward by mechanisms of reinforcement of the social bond merely produces a supplementary requirement impossible to fulfil.

Yet the cortical regions involved are not (totally) different from the zones involved in depression. “The cerebral images obtained by A. Bartels and S. Zeki are fascinating in this respect. They show that in romantic love as in maternal love what is partially deactivated are not only brain areas involved in negative emotions or in depression, as the lateral prefrontal cortex, but areas involved in critical judgment, as the median prefrontal cortex. In other words, at least according to A. Bartels and S. Zeki, judgements by a mother on her child, by a lover on his beloved, judgments that sometimes surprise everyone, would be influenced by cerebral deactivations”.<sup>[9]</sup>

We thus have a confrontation of interpretations:

either the emphasis is put on the unlinking of love and judgment or on love and depression. It is more “moralistic” to put forward that love is not moral as it is founded on a proper satisfaction than to emphasise that love is a move away from depression. What is undoubtedly even more alarming is the prospect of the presentation of a drug to cure attachment disorders and disorders of the social bond, based on the effects of oxytocin. One envisages opening up a whole new domain of medication from social phobias to antisocial behaviour. This could undoubtedly take the place of antidepressants, put in an awkward position by the prohibition on prescribing them to minors.

### Damasio and the mental image of emotion

We can see the same conservative effect at work in another kind of impact the neurosciences are having. It concerns their uncritical use of the notion of “mental image”. Yet their project can do without this notion. Contemporary cognitivism has a noble origin. The pragmatics of language has rid itself of the code-message model to centre it on a process of deductive inference. Above all the name of Paul Grice is associated with this. A philosopher of language presents this connection. “According to the inferential model, different versions of which have been developed in contemporary pragmatics, an utterance is a piece of evidence of the speaker’s meaning. Decoding the linguistic sentence meaning is seen as just one part of the process of comprehension – a process that relies on both this linguistic meaning and on the context in order to identify the speaker’s meaning. (...) meaning, in Grice’s analysis, (...) is an intention to achieve a certain effect upon the mind of the hearer by means of the hearer’s recognition of the very intention to achieve this effect. Seen this way, communication depends upon the ability of human beings to attribute mental states to others; that is, it depends upon their



naïve psychology (...) Living in a world inhabited not only by physical objects and living bodies, but also in mental states, humans may want to act upon these mental states. They may seek to change the desires and beliefs of others".<sup>[10]</sup> So there is no effect of meaning without the will to decode the intention of the other. Lacan's formula according to which the subject receives its message from the Other in an inverse form includes the intention of decoding, integrates a critique of the code-message model.

It is not certain that this initial program on behalf of the various currents of cognitivism will be brought to a favourable ending as a research program. For instance, that of emotional cognitivism which replaces the processes of inference by those of perception while supporting that a feeling is the cognitive perception of an emotion. Antonio Damasio is the paradigmatic author of this approach. In their monumental *Philosophical Foundations of neuroscience*, published recently, Bennett and Hacker are critical of his position in their presentation : "Antonio Damasio's work on patients suffering from emotionally incapacitating brain damage is rightly renowned, and his insistence on a link between the capacity for rational decision making and consequent rational action in pursuit of goals, on the one hand, and the capacity for feeling emotions, on the other, is bold and thought-provoking. However, his speculations on the emotions are, in our view, vitiated by conceptual confusion...Damasio's conception of thoughts is firmly rooted in the eighteenth-century empiricist tradition. Thoughts, he claims, consist of mental images (which may be visual or auditory etc..., and may be of items in the world or of words or symbols that signify such items). Damasio apparently holds the view that if thought were not exhibited to us in the form of images of things and images of words signifying things, then we would not be able to say what we think...Damasio, distinguishes an

emotion from the feeling of an emotion. An emotion is a bodily response to a mental image, and the feeling of an emotion is a cognitive response to that bodily condition, a cognitive response "in connection to the object that excited it, the realization of the nexus between object and emotional body state". Feelings of emotion Damasio avers, are just as cognitive as any other perceptual image, and just as dependent on cerebral-cortex processing as any other image".<sup>[11]</sup> The notion of "mental image" is thus essential in Damasio and in spite of his criticisms of Descartes, he does not seem to be delivered of the presuppositions of the 17<sup>th</sup> century conception of representation. Ian Hacking, as for him, sticks to Damasio's own version of his theory in his last work: *Looking for Spinoza: Joy, Sorrow and the Feeling Brain*.<sup>[12]</sup> "Emotions play out in the theatre of the body. Feelings in the theatre of the mind". Both are for "life regulation" but feelings do it at a higher level. Joy is the feeling of a life in equilibrium, sorrow of life in disarray... A feeling is produced by an emotion. Both feelings and emotions are states, conditions, or processes in the body. An emotion such as pity "is a complex collection of chemical and neural responses forming a distinctive pattern". Moreover, for Damasio there is nothing cognitive about this, and nothing "outer-directed". For him pity is not of or about someone. And emotions seem to be caused by changes in my body. I become aware of my sad look and the low physical spirits caused by being with my aunt and uncle, and that is what induces pity, rather than my emotion of pity making me look sad".<sup>[13]</sup> The idea of Damasio is that of an organism without Other, deeply autistic, turned towards its homeostatic self-regulation brought about in the course of evolution. Hacking says "what he chooses to call emotions come first historically speaking in the history of evolution and they are first causally, as the items that instigate a cycle of responses within the body. They produce feelings, one that evolved later, and are in turn

monitored and used in what he calls mind".<sup>[14]</sup>

In the end, the meaning of the vocabulary of the register of affects is thus nothing else, than the particular emotion that is felt in the body. It is possible *one on one* to proceed to an application, a mapping of feelings on the states of the body which are the emotions. No more metaphorical or metonymic gliding possible, although the register of the affects is part of language. It is what Hacking criticizes: "feelings and emotions have been part of the language of person, both for expressing my self and for describing others. Damasio proposes something different: instant anatomical identification of emotions; this is what they really are, that is what joy is. Moreover, there seems in damasio's account to be no "I" left who decides how to handle the situation. There is just self regulating homeostasis going on this organism . Damasio will surely go on lobbying for an identification of the personal language with current anatomical conjectures".<sup>[15]</sup>

A certain modernistic current of the IPA which is dominant in its leading spheres, tries to adopt from the cognitive sciences in a twofold way. From cognitivism, they retain the criticism of the code-message approach, and base them on the distinction between language faculty and naive psychology or *Theory of mind* that any subject attributes to the other. From emotional cognitivism, they retain the access to an unambiguous definition of affect.

Peter Fonagy or Mark Solms give a description of psychoanalytic activity, making use in a non critical way of the notion of "mental representations" like cognitivists use it.<sup>[16]</sup> For them, the listening of the analyst is occupied by "mental representations" built on references from the words of the analysand. The capability to attribute to the other a naive psychology is thus the first condition for a "communicational" conception of the unconscious. The theory of the mind in question stems from what the cognitivists call the capability of *mind-reading*. As an author of this current puts it : "For an interpretation to be

heard by the patient, a certain number of conditions are essential. The first is that the two interlocutors share a certain theory of the mind [... ]".<sup>[17]</sup>

The "theory of mind" attributed to the other makes it possible to give an imaginary version of the place of the Other. It then allows the deployment of a particular mode of inference, which would be characteristic of psychoanalysis. The recourse to empathy thus defines the possibility to have access to the meaning of what the analysand says. The meaning that is situated beyond the decoding of the signified.

Let us thus bring together this two level conception and the conception of Damasio. According to Damasio, first there is a "state of the body" perceived by the brain. It defines an emotion. In the same way cognitivist psychoanalysts transcribe the "state of the body" into a "mental state" corresponding to the "strength of the instinctual impulse". Then there is an "effect of pleasure or displeasure" taking into account the context within which this "strength of the instinctual impulse" inscribes itself. The second moment is quite superposable on the perception of the emotion by the feeling of this emotion. Thus, the conception of the affect as giving meaning to the subject's statement joins perfectly with the conception of the emotion according to Antonio Damasio's emotional cognitivism. Replacing the name of Damasio by that of a psychoanalyst cognitivist in Hacking's critique would suffice to discern a possible future for psychoanalysis such as it is aimed at by the IPA: "They will surely go on to lobby for their reduction of private language to current affective conjectures".

The reformulation of psychoanalysis making use of cognitive theories can take many forms. Another example would be that of Peter Fonagy,<sup>[18]</sup> with his book *Affect Regulation, Mentalization, and the Development of the Self*. There too, the confusing effect "false science" is guaranteed, whatever the interest of the neurological

research on which it is based can be. The critique/review that reports in the last issue of *The American Journal of Psychoanalysis* puts it without beating about the bush : “At times I found myself confused over the purpose of this work. Since it is dealing primarily with cognitive processes and theory of mind, was it written for cognitive psychologist to demonstrate the ways in which psychoanalytic concepts can be located within their field? Or was the author’ intention to help analysts better appreciate ways in which psychoanalysis can be enriched by concepts such as learning theory, or by the fundamentals of biofeedback? ...At times the writing is dense far from accessible. I found myself working hard to distill the ideas from the language they were couched in, and often wondered how the might be relevant to psychoanalysts”. <sup>[19]</sup>

The blind window of the standard of cognition conceived this way eludes the Other. It presents us with a body organism determined to condemn us to being merely puppets of ourselves. Evolutionary psychology plays the part of guarantor of this whole conception. It assures us that our organism and its psyche are perfectly functional. Evolution guarantees it. When nature as self-evident evaporate by the action of science. When science cannot guarantee a return to the order of a cosmos by a "theory of everything", evolutionism brings us an *Aufhebung* of nature. In this way a natural reassuring order is left behind for us and evolutionary psychology is a sign of it. Emotion and cognition succeed and reinforce each other since the order of the evolution says so. In this way the program of civilization itself comprises no more limits. The irreducibility of the contradiction between drive and civilization vanishes. In this sense, the recourse to the neurosciences and to evolutionary psychology permits an unimpeded progressivism for civilization on the one hand and directs the cure towards obtaining the pleasure of the self-regulated organism on the other hand. We should not

make use of the neurosciences to make them say that they say the same thing as psychoanalysis or to make them confirm psychoanalysis. The question is rather to distinguish the two projects of scientific objectivity and psychoanalytic objectality. The object (a) is not demonstrated by science. It is from the object (a) and the symptom that we have to question the effect of science on the way the subject is produced and the regime of its certainties.<sup>[20]</sup> The principles of Lacanian psychoanalytic practice base the interpretation on the experience of a real proper to psychoanalysis, and not on the conformity with the objects produced by a scientific discourse.

(Translated from French to English by Lieve Billiet, for NLS-Messenger)

NLS Web Site : [www.amp-nls.org](http://www.amp-nls.org) >> NLS congress  
subscribe online

WAP Web Site : [www.wapol.org](http://www.wapol.org)

<sup>[1]</sup> D. Widlöcher, in *L'Express*, 23/08/2004, p.55.

<sup>[2]</sup> What a coincidence ! The AMP just held its Congress in Brazil past July.

<sup>[3]</sup> G. Pommier, *Comment les neurosciences démontrent la psychanalyse*, Ed. Flammarion, 2004.

<sup>[4]</sup> M. Solms, *Scientific American*, May 2004.

<sup>[5]</sup> A. Bartels, S. Zeki, “The neural correlates of maternal and romantic love”, Wellcome Department of Imaging Neuroscience, University College London, in *NeuroImage*, nr. 21 (2004); p. 1155-1166. I owe this reference to Professor Jim Hopkins of University College. I want to express my gratitude here for that.

<sup>[6]</sup> O. Postel-Vinay, “Le cerveau et l’amour”, in *La Recherche*,

nr. 380, novembre 2004.

[7] Ibid., p. 35.

[8] Ibid., p. 37

[9] Ibid.

[10] Gloria Orrigi, Dan Sperber, A pragmatic perspective on the evolution of language and languages, available on the site [www.interdisciplines.org](http://www.interdisciplines.org), May 25<sup>th</sup> 2004.

[11] Bennet, M.R., Hackeer, P.M., *Philosophical Foundations of Neuroscience*, Victoria, Blackwell Publishing 203, pp.210-211.

[12] Damasio, Antonio, *Looking for Spinoza: Joy, Sorrow and the Feeling Brain*, Harcourt, 2004.

[13] Hackin, Ian, Minding the brain, *The New York Review of Books*, June 24<sup>th</sup> 2004, p. 32-33.

[14] Ibid., p. 33

[15] Ibid., p. 35-36

[16] Mark Solms, Psychiatrist and honorary lecturer in Neurosurgery at the St Bartholomme's and Royal London School of Medicine, *The Neuropsychology of Dreams: A Clinical Anatomical Study* (Laurence Erlbam Associates 1997). *Psychoanalyse et Neurosciences*, in *Scientific American*, March 2004.

[17] Widlöcher, D., *Les nouvelles cartes de la psychanalyse*, Paris, Editions Odile Jacob, 1996, p. 135.

[18] Fonagy, P., Gergely, G., Jurist, E.L. and Targent, M., Affect Regulation, *Mentalization and the Development of the Self*, New York, Other Press, 2002.

[19] Phyllia, Tyson, *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association*, vol 52/2, 2004.

[20] I refer to J.-A. Miller's lessons of January 2005, in which he presents Lacans seminar "Joyce le sinthome".

