

I agree that psychoanalysts can have an interesting dialogue with neuroscientists, but it oversteps the mark to conclude that consciousness (and unconsciousness) can be explained by the working of the brain. There is an interaction between a working brain and its context. In this sense I agree with Hobson's (2003) comments on the two directions of causality, but there is more to be considered: consciousness and unconsciousness are not explained by this interdependence.

The neuroscientific concept of the 'mirror neuron' is merely an interpretation, and one that for me is no more than a false explanation, or at least a tautology. To call a neuron firing during the execution and observation of the movements of another person a 'mirror neuron' is, of course, an interpretation of the two simultaneous phenomena. To say more on this matter we need an interpretation by the subject him- or herself. When Hobson writes that minds mirror one another, that statement does not tell us anything about self-consciousness.

In considering the interaction between one person and another in relation to identity and self-consciousness, the mirroring stage plays an important role. However, as investigators we remain outsiders. To learn about the subjective experience of

mirroring we need the interpretation of the subject. This interpretation will include the symbolic function of human beings (i.e. the potential to recall a reality by a word) and goes beyond the imitation (mirroring) of words. Of course, the subject hears the spoken words from the other within the context. But there is more than just the repetition of the word of the other. This is what is referred to as the hole in the being, or the gap between the thing and the word (as Hegel, Heidegger and Sartre postulated). When we consider the subject as a thing among other things, then something very strange happens when the subject names him- or herself; a hole is then made in the person's own being. This is what is referred to as alienation: 'The human being has a special relation with his own image – a relation of gap, of alienating tension' (Lacan, 1988).

There is always a gap between the spoken word and the thing for speech to exist, but once the subject speaks, he actualises the gap again and again. What then can be the relation between the mind and the brain? Nowadays the neurosciences are popular, so it is quite accepted to say that the psychic functions are epiphenomena of the brain. For me this statement is much too simplistic. It does not take into account

that there is a fundamental difference between a word and the thing it describes. As mirroring needs a distance between the two objects, so it is *a fortiori* necessary that there is a distance between the symbolic and the material. The distance between word and thing creates a suspense in which symbolic function tries to bridge that gap. Interpretation is one of these metaphorical bridges.

Since there is a fundamental gap between symbol and thing, between thought and matter, it is impossible to explain the mind as a product of the functioning brain. Thoughts are not the excreta of neurons. In this sense the (un)conscious can not be found in the neuron. Explaining the mind as a product of the brain is a metaphor, and a bad metaphor.

**Hobson, R. P. (2003)** Between ourselves: psychodynamics and the interpersonal domain. *British Journal of Psychiatry*, **182**, 193–195.

**Lacan, J. (1988)** *The Seminar. Book 2. The Ego in Freud's Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis, 1954–1955*. New York: Norton.

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## One hundred years ago

### Psychopathology in prisons

THE philosophic doctrine that our actions are free is generally based on the consciousness of freedom; and in its legal aspect on the sense of accountability or responsibility. That this consciousness of freedom exists is a psychical fact, and therefore a psychological examination of the conviction, an analysis of this psychical phenomenon, is a necessary preliminary to the philosophical inquiry.

It may be contended that the question of a transcendental ego or noumenal will behind, superior to the law of causation and capable of free choice, is not legitimately within the domain of psychology; but it is manifest that if psychology, in unfolding and genetically explaining the

phenomena of volition, prove that this mode of consciousness does not necessitate any such idea of a transcendental will, that in fact this sense of freedom may and does accompany actions which are absolutely determined, the psychological foundation is taken away from the doctrine of free will. This task Professor Hoche of Freiburg<sup>1</sup> has set himself to accomplish. He is frankly a determinist, entirely at variance with the Kantian doctrine of a self-determining will. He affirms that the observations of psychopathology must be taken into account in the normal psychology, because the mental

<sup>1</sup>*Dik Freiheit des Willens, vom Standpunkte der Psychopathologie*. Von Professor Dr. A. Hoche. Wiesbaden: J. F. Bergmann; and Glasgow: F. Bauermeister. 1902 (Demy 8vo, pp. 40. Is. 3d).

activities of the insane do not differ intrinsically from those of the so-called normal, but only in degree; and that, moreover, there exist all gradations from the sane to the insane.

Now, the feeling of freedom exists in many forms of mental disease, particularly and to a high degree in mania, as to whose unfreedom of volition no doubt can exist, and this feeling of freedom, Dr. Hoche contends, is related to the central emission of motor impulses.

In the next place, the observations of psychopathologists show that in the empiric character much greater differences exist in permanent, deeply-seated, elementary qualities than is customarily recognized by theoretic psychology. The value, therefore, of conclusions based on the hypothesis that

in all men there are certain psychical processes, particularly within the region of the emotions, which are for all men identical, is thus at once nullified, and with these necessarily, Dr. Hoche says, conclusions founded on the belief in an ever and everywhere present conscience. The conscience, says the author, exhibits the same variations as do other emotions. With the insane the conscience wastes, or it is subject to objectively unfounded fluctuations. Also in neurotic and borderland cases this variability of conscience is found.

The clear parallelism in fact between material and mental processes does not permit of such a distinction as that the principle of causality holds good only for the material and not for the mental side of these processes.

The practical importance of these doctrines lies in its relation to the penal treatment of that large class of malefactors – and only those with an intimate acquaintance with prison populations know how surprisingly large this class is – who are neither of normal mental and physical make-up nor actually insane, degenerates, hereditarily-burdened individuals, or, to use the prison term, the weak minded. A system of graduated punishments is, Dr. Hoche says, futile, and punishment at all unreasonable, and for these he would substitute individual treatment decided by the medico-psychological examination, and some form of sequestration so as to render them harmless to society.

We believe that those who have had experience in dealing with prisoners in this

country would be very much disposed to agree with Professor Hoche on the ground that the separation of weak-minded from ordinary prisoners would conduce to better management of the latter class. Dr. Hoche has had wide experience in such matters, is the author of the important work on forensic psychiatry already reviewed in our pages,<sup>2</sup> and his views deserve the most serious gravest consideration.

#### REFERENCE

*British Medical Journal*, 26 September 1903, 746.

Researched by Henry Rollin, Emeritus Consultant Psychiatrist, Horton Hospital, Epsom, Surrey

<sup>2</sup> *Handbuch der gerichtlichen Psychiatrie*. 1901. Berlin: August Hirschwald.