

**WEEK 1 ANSWER TO QUESTION 3**  
STEP 2.3 ASK MARK

So now we come to question three, and also a little confession, which is that I forgot to bring my spectacles into the studio today, so let's hope I can read it.

It goes something like this: “Why do you think some psychoanalysts doing clinical work might be hesitant or even reluctant towards neuroscience? For example, Adam Phillips has very clearly expressed that he has no interest, and some others are doubtful if neuroscience should have anything to do with psychoanalysis.”

So, here I'm being asked why do I think some psychoanalysts hold this view, and of course, I'm not qualified to say why they hold that point of view. I'm sure that they're only too happy to account for themselves. But I will make some remarks upon why I think they're wrong to have that point of view.

Let's start like this. Who is to decide what psychoanalysts should or shouldn't be doing? Psychoanalysts are a body of people – quite a large body of people. If I remember correctly, the International Psychoanalytic Association has something like 8,000 members or more. And of course, there are going to be a variety of opinions in any group of 8,000 or more.

But the question as to whether psychoanalysis as an enterprise, if anyone can speak for it, who should that be? I suggest that perhaps a worthwhile sort of place to look for an authoritative voice on what is and is not psychoanalysis is Sigmund Freud. And Sigmund Freud certainly was of the view that psychoanalysts should be involving themselves in neuroscience – he said that repeatedly in his writings from the beginning to the end of his working life.

He said, for the present – and by “present” he meant late 19th century and early 20th century – psychoanalysis has nothing to do with biology, neurology, neuroscience, but that in the future, we look to those disciplines for great insights. In fact, if I may paraphrase something that he said in his famous “Beyond the Pleasure Principle”, he said if biology is a land of truly unlimited possibilities, in a few dozen years, it may blow away the artificial fabric of our hypotheses.

So, that's Freud saying that he looks to neuroscience not only as having relevant things to say to psychoanalysis, but that he expects it to have radical things to say, which will lead to gigantic changes in psychoanalytical theory. So that's one way of addressing the question. Everybody can have a view, but who's to speak for psychoanalysis as a discipline? I suggest let's start by asking Freud what he thinks.

Another relevant point is in those days when psychoanalysis was first being

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developed, it wasn't considered just a clinical discipline. The questioner says, “Why do you think some psychoanalysts doing clinical work might be hesitant or even reluctant toward neuroscience?”

In the early years of psychoanalysis, it was considered very much a science. It was an attempt to discern the general, functional principles governing that part of nature that we call the human mind. There must be some laws governing this part of nature, said Freud, let's try and find out what they are.

And that's what psychoanalysis was all about, resulting in the development of successive models of the mind in Freud's writings and then in the writings of his early followers and the next generation of analysts. They were trying to build up an understanding of how the mind works. But nowadays, to quote a good friend of mine, nowadays psychoanalysts are “dentists” of the mind. They go to a kind of trade school to learn how to do it, and they're clinicians in that sense, like general practitioners.

Nothing wrong with that, but the question as posed – should psychoanalysis or should it not have something to do with the neurosciences – I think has a lot to do with that question. Is psychoanalysis a scientific enterprise? Is it based upon generally valid findings about how the mind works?

I'm leading up to this: to the extent that the psychoanalytical models of how the mind works are erroneous, to that extent, the application of those models – the application of the theoretical assumptions upon which the clinical practise of psychoanalysis is based – will also be erroneous, so we'll also be hampered by misconceptions as to how this thing that you're treating, as to how it works.

There have been some really important insights in the neurosciences in recent years which challenge fundamental theoretical suppositions in psychoanalysis. And I just don't see how it can be otherwise but that those changed understandings of how the mind works can't have implications for how we go about treating the mind.

So I think psychoanalytical clinicians really have everything to gain by being interested in neuroscience, because the neurosciences – and this is my last point I want to make in response to this question – neuroscientists are studying the same part of nature as psychoanalysts are.

When I answered the first question in relation to subjectivity, I made the point that everything has a subjective aspect and an objective aspect. You can observe everything from the outside, and you can be everything. And those of us who are mental creatures, it feels like something to be us.

Now, I think that the relationship between psychoanalysis and the neurosciences is closely akin to that relationship of subjectivity versus objectivity. The psychoanalytical enterprise – both as a science and as a clinical method – treats the human being from the subjective point of view: the being of the human is what psychoanalysis is concerned with. And the same thing – observe from the outside, the object, the body of the human – is what the neurosciences are interested in.

So if you have two different points of view on the same thing, why would you want to

leave out half of the information that you can glean? To exclude all the objective information that the neurosciences today have to offer about how the human mind works – to detach that from what we can learn from the subjective point of view – just makes absolutely no sense to me.

It's like that old moral about the blind men and the elephant. It's an old moral, that's why they said blind *men*, not blind *people*. And it went something like there's one guy grabs the tail of the elephant and thinks an elephant is sort of a long, thin thing with a tuft at the end. Another one gets ahold of the ear and thinks an elephant is a big, flappy, flat thing. And another one gets hold of the belly, another one the trunk. And each one of them thinks they're dealing with a very different creature, until they pool their information, and then the big picture emerges – the whole picture. And I think the relationship between psychoanalysis and neuroscience is just like that.

So why do some say that we shouldn't? Ask them, but I think they'll have a hard time providing a convincing answer. I think many psychoanalysts don't want to have anything to do with the neurosciences because it's foreign to them, it's scary. Or it's new and they're old dogs, and they don't want to learn new tricks. But the psychoanalysis of the future will have neuroscience deeply integrated into it. I'm sure of that.



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