Freud after Freud

***Reflections on Mark Solms's* The Only Cure**.

Does Neuroscience Vindicate Freud?

It is a question that sounds both absurd and inevitable. Absurd because Freud died in 1939 and could therefore have had no inkling of functional MRI scans, dopaminergic circuits, or prediction-error models. Inevitable because, willingly or not, his spirit continues to haunt contemporary discussions of trauma, desire, dreams, attachment, personality, and psychotherapy. Few thinkers have experienced such a turbulent posthumous fate. Freud was admired, canonised, dismantled, and eventually almost buried. From the 1970s onwards, an entire industry emerged around Freud criticism. Karl Popper elevated psychoanalysis to the status of a prototype pseudoscience on the grounds that it was allegedly unfalsifiable. Historians, journalists, and scientists attacked his theories, his clinical method, and sometimes even his character. For many, Freud became less a scientist than a cultural myth.

It is against this backdrop that Mark Solms's *The Only Cure* (2025) appears. Solms does not merely seek to correct a few misunderstandings. He undertakes something considerably more ambitious: a scientific, therapeutic, and ethical rehabilitation of Freud. Not of every hypothesis Freud ever proposed, but of those core intuitions that, according to Solms, still constitute the heart of psychoanalysis.

This makes *The Only Cure* both fascinating and challenging. The book is simultaneously a history of psychoanalysis, an overview of affective neuroscience, a defence of psychoanalytic treatment, and an attempt to bridge the gap between consulting room and laboratory. Through Teddy P. and other clinical cases, Solms also invites the reader into the realities of long-term psychoanalytic work with complex psychopathology. The result alternates between scientific treatise, personal testimony, and polemic against half a century of Freud-bashing.

The author is exceptionally well placed to undertake such a project. His intellectual trajectory has led from neuroscience and clinical neurology to psychoanalysis, dream research, and the editorship of the revised *Standard Edition* of Freud's collected works. Few scholars have immersed themselves as deeply in Freud's writings as Solms. Yet the question inevitably remains: does that mean he is right?

It is no coincidence that, alongside Freud, John Bowlby emerges as an important source of inspiration throughout the book. Less convincing, however, is Solms's tendency to take occasional swipes at Jungians, Kleinians, Bionians, and relational psychoanalysts along the way. Above all, Jacques Lacan and his followers come in for particularly sharp criticism. Solms even transforms *Cave canem* into *Cave Lacanem*.

Freud as a Theorist of Feeling

The central thesis of *The Only Cure* is that modern neuroscience has confirmed Freud far more often than it has refuted him. This is a striking claim, for during much of the past half-century precisely the opposite appeared to be true. Neurotransmitters, brain networks, and cognitive models seemed to push psychoanalysis ever further towards the margins.

According to Solms, however, this verdict rests largely on a misunderstanding. Much of the criticism implicitly assumes that psychoanalysis is fundamentally a theory of cognition. Yet, in Solms's view, Freud was first and foremost a theorist of feeling. What drives human beings is not primarily what they think, but what they feel. Affect is the engine of psychic life.

At first glance, this may sound almost banal, but its implications are far-reaching. Throughout much of the twentieth century, the mind was conceived as an information-processing machine. Cognition occupied centre stage, while feelings were treated as little more than a subjective colouring of mental life. Solms reverses this hierarchy. He poses a simple but fundamental question: why does an organism feel anything at all? Why does hunger feel unpleasant, loss painful, proximity reassuring, and love rewarding?

A computer processes information. A human being experiences information. It is precisely here, Solms argues, that the difference between a brain and a mind resides: between *having a brain* and *being a living I*. It is one of the book's most elegant formulations. It recalls Oliver Sacks's warning that a neurology which forgets subjective experience ultimately loses sight of its very object of study.

From this perspective, Freud acquires a different face. Not Freud as theorist of sexuality or high priest of the unconscious, but Freud as investigator of felt experience. Behind concepts such as drive, libido, and wish-fulfilment, Solms uncovers an early attempt to understand how living organisms orient themselves within an unpredictable world.

From Libido to SEEKING

At this point, Solms draws extensively on the work of Jaak Panksepp (1998; Panksepp & Biven, 2012). According to affective neuroscience, beneath our thoughts lies an evolutionarily older

layer of emotional systems that orient and energise behaviour. SEEKING, FEAR, RAGE, CARE, PLAY, PANIC/GRIEF, and LUST constitute biologically rooted systems that continually inform us about our relationship to the world.

Of these, the SEEKING system occupies a particularly central position. Freud spoke of libido. Panksepp spoke of SEEKING. Neuroscientists speak of mesolimbic dopaminergic circuits. The terminology differs, yet each refers to the same fundamental phenomenon: an organism propelled by a state of incompleteness that impels it to search.

This is one of the strongest sections of the book. Solms does not attempt to vindicate Freud word for word. He readily acknowledges that aspects of classical drive theory have become obsolete. The death drive, indeed, is consigned to the dustbin. Yet beneath the outdated terminology, he identifies intuitions that have been rediscovered by other means. What Freud called libido, drive, and wish now reappears as motivational activation, affective regulation, and predictive modelling. The vocabulary has changed; the underlying questions remain remarkably alive.

The Return of the Dream

This becomes particularly evident in Solms's discussion of dreaming. For a long time, Freud's theory of dreams was regarded as one of the most thoroughly refuted components of psychoanalysis. Above all, the research of Allan Hobson appeared to demonstrate that dreams were little more than random by-products of brain activity during REM sleep.

Solms himself played a major role in revising this view. His neuropsychological research demonstrated that dreaming is far more closely linked to motivational and affective systems than had long been assumed. Some patients lose REM sleep while retaining the capacity to dream. Others lose the ability to dream following damage to motivational brain regions, despite largely intact sleep architecture.

Dreams therefore appear to be something more than mere cognitive noise. They remain connected to desires, expectations, conflicts, and affective concerns. They may not possess precisely the structure Freud envisioned in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, but neither are they meaningless by-products of a sleeping brain.

Here again Freud emerges less as a triumphant victor than as a surprisingly contemporary interlocutor. Not because he possessed all the answers, but because he often asked the right questions.

The Predictive Brain

The discussion becomes even more intriguing when Solms turns to contemporary predictive-processing theories.

According to this perspective, the brain functions as a continuously predictive system (Friston, 2010; Clark, 2016). It attempts to anticipate future states on the basis of prior experience. Whenever its predictions prove inaccurate, a prediction error arises that demands correction. Consciousness emerges from surprise; learning occurs in the tension between expectation and reality.

Solms sees in this a modern reformulation of something Freud had already suspected. Memories are not merely archives of the past. Their function is to improve our predictions of the future. We remember not primarily in order to preserve the past, but in order to survive what lies ahead.

Here an unexpected bridge emerges between psychoanalysis and neuroscience. Freud regarded symptoms as repetitions of past experiences that had outlived their relevance. Predictive processing describes something strikingly similar in a different vocabulary: outdated models of reality continue to generate predictions even when they are no longer adequate.

Ultimately, both perspectives are grounded in the same intuition: the past survives within the present because it is constantly attempting to predict the future.

Why Psychoanalysis?

At first glance, the title *The Only Cure* sounds provocative, as though psychoanalysis were the sole legitimate treatment and all other therapeutic approaches somehow deficient. Yet this is not what Solms means.

In medicine, antibiotics may constitute a cure because they address the underlying cause of a disorder. Many other interventions primarily alleviate symptoms or reduce their consequences. Solms's argument is analogous. Medication may diminish symptoms. Supportive interventions may improve functioning. Cognitive techniques may help modify behavioural patterns. But when the problem resides in implicit emotional expectations themselves, it is precisely those expectations that must change.

According to Solms, many psychological difficulties are rooted in affective predictions that were once adaptive but have subsequently lost their relevance. The child who learned that intimacy is dangerous continues to expect rejection or injury even where safety is possible. The child who received attention only by adapting to the wishes of others may continue to erase themselves long after such compliance is no longer necessary. The past is not remembered as past; it functions as a template for the future.

From this perspective, psychoanalytic treatment acquires a surprisingly contemporary significance. It creates a setting in which such predictions can be reactivated—not as abstract knowledge, but as lived experience. Within the transference, the past reappears in the present. Not in order to be reconstructed, but in order to be revised.

In contemporary terminology, one might speak of the reconsolidation of implicit memory traces (Lane et al., 2015). In classical psychoanalytic language, one speaks of insight, working-through, and structural change.

According to Solms, this also helps explain why psychoanalytic treatments often continue to exert an effect long after they have ended: the so-called sleeper effect. Something changes in the way a person predicts themselves, others, and the world. It is a compelling idea. Yet questions remain.

The Unconscious and Implicit Memory

A first question concerns the status of the unconscious itself. Solms frequently equates the unconscious with non-declarative memory systems. This is persuasive up to a point. Over recent decades, research has abundantly demonstrated that a substantial portion of mental life unfolds outside conscious awareness. Yet the psychoanalytic unconscious encompasses more than implicit memory traces alone.

Its most characteristic aspect is perhaps repression itself: not what has merely been forgotten, but what remains actively separated from consciousness. It returns in dreams, symptoms, slips of the tongue, mistakes, fantasies, and repetitions. There it behaves as though governed by a logic of its own.

This touches upon one of the enduring tensions within neuropsychoanalysis. Can repression be fully translated into the language of memory processes? Or is something lost in the translation? *The Only Cure* does not offer a definitive answer. Perhaps no definitive answer is possible. Yet it is precisely at this point that a productive tension emerges between neurobiological and psychoanalytic descriptions.

To paraphrase the remark once made by Hans Magnus Enzensberger about the Belgian monarchy: not unity but disunity creates strength. Divergence is often the source of creativity.

The Unconscious Feels — and Speaks

A second question concerns language. Strikingly, language occupies a less prominent position in *The Only Cure* than affect. With Lacan, the situation is almost exactly reversed. This is

understandable. Solms seeks to uncover the affective foundations of psychoanalysis. Yet in doing so, another imbalance occasionally threatens to arise.

The unconscious does not merely feel. It also speaks. Slips of the tongue, symptoms, dreams, and jokes do not follow an affective logic alone. They also obey a linguistic logic. Here both the early Freud and Jacques Lacan remain indispensable interlocutors. Not because they refute Solms, but because they emphasise a dimension that remains relatively underdeveloped in his model: the symbolic structure of psychic life.

Words never refer unambiguously to reality. Their meaning depends upon context, history, and use. As a result, a uniquely human symbolic space emerges in which meanings become detached from the needs from which they originally arose. Words acquire a life of their own. They organise memories, identities, expectations, and fantasies. They make culture possible, but also misunderstanding, ideology, and neurotic symptoms.

Language filters reality, yet it can also torment us. Human beings inhabit not only a world of feelings but also a world of meanings. And the two never entirely coincide.

Here lies my principal reservation concerning Solms's argument. He explains with remarkable clarity why an organism feels. But does he also explain why human beings desire? The two questions are not identical.

Human beings frequently desire what eludes them. Sometimes they even desire what intensifies their suffering. The history of love, ambition, addiction, and neurosis cannot always be understood as a quest for homeostatic equilibrium (Van Haute, 2000).

Bazan and Dall'Aglio

It is precisely at this juncture that the Lacanian-inspired contributions of Ariane Bazan and John Dall'Aglio become particularly interesting (Kinet, 2008; Kinet & Bazan, 2010; Kinet, 2025).

Bazan (2012, 2024) is among the rare authors who take both Lacan and neuroscience seriously. For her, the question is not whether meaning is biologically grounded, but how meanings become embodied without being reducible to their biological substrates. Her work represents one of the most convincing attempts to bring the Lacanian signifier into dialogue with contemporary neuroscience (Kinet, 2023).

Even more ambitious is Dall'Aglio's project (2024). He explores whether concepts such as desire, subjectivity, and even *jouissance* can be reconciled with contemporary neurocomputational models. In doing so, he extends the concept of *jouissance* beyond the sexual domain and relates it to a range of affective systems.

Whether this project succeeds entirely remains open to debate. An orthodox Lacanian might object that *jouissance* is more than an excess of prediction error and that the Real cannot simply be equated with biological incompleteness. Nevertheless, the discussion takes a fascinating turn. The question is no longer whether neuropsychoanalysis understands Lacan, but whether Lacan may unexpectedly converge with certain contemporary models of the brain.

Lost in Translation

Yet, in my view, the fundamental issue lies even deeper. That feelings are biologically grounded seems scarcely open to dispute. Hunger, fear, loss, lust, care, and curiosity are rooted in affective systems that we share with other mammals. In this sense, Solms is probably right to read Freud as a theorist of feeling.

But human beings are not merely feeling animals. They are also speaking animals.

Antonio Damasio (1999, 2010) describes human beings as organisms endowed with *extended consciousness*: a form of consciousness that not only experiences feelings but also organises them symbolically, autobiographically, and narratively. Human mental life, therefore, exists not only within the immediacy of affect but also within representations of itself.

Borrowing freely from Lacan, one might even speak of an *il n'y a pas de rapport cérébral* between cortex and limbic system. There is no harmonious correspondence between feeling and meaning. The translation from affect into language, and from language back into affect, is always incomplete.

We become, quite literally, lost in translation.

This may explain why love never entirely coincides with attachment, why desire never fully coincides with need, and why symptoms often reveal more than they intend to say.

Friedrich Nietzsche described the human being as a sick animal. Not because we are defective, but because we are condemned to symbolisation. Our feelings must constantly be translated into words, meanings, and narratives that never fully coincide with what is actually felt.

It is precisely here, I believe, that psychoanalysis continues to contribute something that no neuroscience can wholly replace. Psychoanalysis investigates not only what we feel, but also what becomes of those feelings once they enter language.

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This is not a refutation of Solms. Quite the contrary. It is perhaps precisely where his project becomes most fruitful. For once one accepts that affect constitutes the foundational layer of

mental life, an immediate further question arises: what happens to affect when it becomes human?

This, to my mind, is where the deepest affinity between Freud, Solms, Lacan, Bazan, and Dall'Aglio can be found. Their theories differ considerably, yet they all begin from the same conviction: that human beings are less transparent to themselves than they imagine, and that it is precisely within this opacity that the possibility of change resides.

The best books do not settle a debate. They reopen it. *The Only Cure* does precisely that. It compels psychoanalysts to engage once more with neuroscience and challenges neuroscientists to take seriously questions they have long regarded as obsolete.

For me, this is ultimately the book's greatest achievement. Solms does not prove that Freud was right. Rather, he demonstrates convincingly that Freud was far less wrong than many of his critics have claimed.

More than that, he shows that some of the most pressing questions in contemporary affective neuroscience lie surprisingly close to questions Freud was already formulating more than a century ago.

Why do we feel? Why do we dream? Why do we repeat? Why do we desire? Why do we suffer? And why can a conversation sometimes change more than a medication?

After more than six hundred pages, none of these questions receives a definitive answer. That may appear to be a weakness. I suspect, however, that Freud himself would have regarded it as a compliment.

As Umberto Eco (1962) famously argued, fruitful thought belongs to the realm of the *opera aperta*: an open and living system rather than a closed and dead one.

In that respect, *The Only Cure* succeeds admirably. It neither canonises Freud nor buries him once and for all. Instead, it returns him to the conversation.

And perhaps that is the most one can reasonably ask of any serious intellectual project.

For Freud's true legacy may not consist in having provided the final answers, but in having formulated questions that continue to demand new answers. Solms reminds us that these questions remain very much alive.

Whether one approaches them through psychoanalysis, neuroscience, or some future synthesis of the two, they continue to revolve around the same enduring mystery: how a biological organism becomes a subject who feels, dreams, desires, suffers, remembers, and speaks.

That mystery remains unresolved. Fortunately so.

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