

REPLY TO KOENRAAD VERBOVEN'S COMMENT

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I am grateful to Dr. Verboven for his comment, because it is well-argued and thus allows me to clarify more explicitly what I do and do not want to say. The main purpose of my paper is to draw attention to the methodological problems inherent in the kind of psychohistorical research that is the topic of this conference. To this end my paper is somewhat polemical, emphasizing the differences rather than the similarities between modern and ancient views of the psyche, so as to tease out these problems which are often underestimated or even ignored. Satisfactory solutions need to be worked at from two sides, I suppose, and I will give some ideas on this matter, also to do justice to Verboven's comparative case of economic history.

Publications from a psychohistorical perspective on antiquity that I have seen thus far – and I am not sure whether these are representative or not, but they seem to be – usually begin by conceding that of course there are great differences between ancient and modern societies, but next proceed to apply modern psychological theory without any further qualms. For instance, the beautiful and widely read study by George Devereux, *Dreams in Greek Tragedy* (1976) does precisely this. Devereux acknowledges that ancient authors cannot actually be psycho-analysed anymore (they cannot respond to the analyst's suggestions, a prerequisite to an analysis worth its name), and adds some cautious subtleties regarding the methodological problems involved in his enterprise. But in the same breath he claims the validity of his method without further qualification, because "since the data fit his method, his enterprise and *modus operandi* are legitimate" and because he has given much thought to the problem (Devereux, 1976: x). It is precisely this confident assumption that, after some polite but ineffective gestures towards historical methodology, psychoanalysis is universally applicable, which makes the exchange between the disciplines of history and psychology so vexed.

The difference with the debate on ancient economics in this respect will be clear. The primitivist position could develop as a critique of the

modernist view, precisely because the primitivists questioned whether modern economic concepts were actually relevant to a society which showed no signs of modern economic behaviour. The present quality of the debate, in which historians feel actually insulted when being taken to defend either of both extreme positions, as Verboven tells us, is due precisely to the initial acknowledgement (perhaps exaggerated by the primitivists) that there *is* a problem when applying method A to situation B. I would like psycho-historians to develop the same kind of consciousness about the problems involved in their enterprise, thus enabling them to work towards an acceptable middle-ground.

A second problem in the majority of psychohistorical publications is the aim of the inquiry.¹ Devereux is again a telling and explicit example of what is far more implicit in many other works: the purpose seems not so much to get a better understanding of antiquity (or whatever historical period is at issue) but to contribute to psychoanalytical theory. Such an aim is a legitimate one for a psychologist, but the resulting work is less likely to produce the kind of insights interesting to historians. This is not only due to differences in disciplinary jargon, although they may add to the problem, but has to do with priorities.² For one, psychoanalysis is theoretically better equipped to discuss individuals than groups, while ancient historians usually are more concerned with groups than with individuals, if it were only because for the greater part of antiquity we know simply very little about individual persons.³ A second factor is probably more fundamental. What psychoanalysts find the most significant elements in individuals or even groups (when they are using these concepts outside the framework of a psychoanalytical therapy), are precisely those factors that are related to the universal models of

1. Among attractive attempts to do it in a different way, I list Philip Slater's *The Glory of Hera. Greek Mythology and the Greek Family* (1968), precisely because he uses psychoanalytical theory to explain a historical problem (and not *vice versa*), that is the question how patriarchal values and attitudes in classical Athens were continued from one generation to the next one, in spite of their obvious negative effects, particularly through the mother-son relationship.

2. In connection with this aspect, we may also note the question of disciplinary training. Psychohistory is done by historians with an educated interest in psychoanalysis, and by psychoanalysts with an educated interest in history (or Greek, in the case of Devereux). Of course it will always be possible to find fault with the competence of someone in one of either fields, given the fact that most human beings are unable to do everything perfectly. Yet I think the main problem is not just the (lack of) professional competence, but rather the divergent aims of the disciplines themselves, as I explain in the text.

3. The idea that it is both possible and valid to transfer psychoanalytic concepts from individuals to groups, has always been accepted within psychoanalytical studies without many real objections. Freud himself had applied his theory often in this way to cultural/historical issues, and many psychoanalysts have enjoyed writing studies of this kind ever since. However, I do not know of a thoroughly critical discussion by a psychoanalyst of the methodological problems involved in this step; for the opinion of an analytically trained historian, Peter Gay (1985: 144-180).

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psychoanalysis (e.g. the Oedipus-complex). These factors, however, are often the least interesting to historians, who want to understand the specificity of the people, culture, text or artefact they are studying. In brief, psychoanalytical theory is ultimately more interested in universals, and history, on the whole, more in specific phenomena.⁴ The tension between the universal and the specific, which is inherent in the humanities at all levels of concepts and interpretation, pulls in different directions in the cases of psychoanalysis and history, even if both disciplines are a complicated mixture of both principles. Such differences should be acknowledged and addressed before a fruitful collaboration can develop. Let me explain this a bit more in detail, and in short and simple terms.

I do not claim that an autonomous psyche did not exist in antiquity and I do not claim that it did. I do think that people in antiquity must have had an "interior" life, but also that it is very difficult to know what it was like.⁵ Psychoanalytical concepts are not an innocent tool in getting to know this; using them is tantamount to making the ancient psyche fit the modern model and thus supposing that it was structurally identical with (though maybe phenomenologically different from) the modern one. So if we want to analyse the ancient psyche in its own right, as Verboven rightly says we should, I am not sure that the psychoanalytical approach is the most satisfactory way to proceed, at least not without making some fundamental qualifications. I have been thinking whether the problems inherent in this procedure are any different from the methods Verboven describes pertaining to economic history. I want to make two observations on this matter. First, when Verboven (in this issue: 26) says that one need not suppose that "insight into the basics of neo-classical economy was a prerequisite for market economies to develop", he is not just saying something quite obvious, but more importantly that he is not essentially troubled by the conflict between the etic and emic level of analysis. The contrast between antiquity and modern society is then solved by posing a difference in *quantity* (cum-reservations): there was a *thin* layer of market economy, plus restrictive social values opposed to market behaviour. A second point is that the economic theories used in this debate apparently lend themselves to be adjusted and adapted to the kind of questions relating to pre-modern economies. One can conclude that there was a thin

4. There are of course exceptions to this rule: e.g., some historians work on past politics to contribute to general political theory, some work on various historical social-economic topics in order to contribute to more general theories on differentiated market economies, slave-societies and the like, but the majority of historical studies focuses on the specificity of the past.

5. Certainly one should distinguish within antiquity according to time and place of our sources throughout our argument, but from now on I'll leave aside this *caveat*, which is also occasionally present in my paper.

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layer of market economy without being required to include the overall conditions of neo-classical economy. With psychoanalysis, however, this seems to be impossible. When applying psychoanalytical theory to historical research, one is required to include the whole psychoanalytical framework lock, stock, and barrel. As soon as one would make use of concepts such as projection or transference, these notions presuppose and hence include a subconscious, the Oedipus-complex and so on and so forth, which is begging the question. In brief, its holistic claims make psychoanalysis a very problematic helpmate. I find it both revealing and deplorable to see that the interesting results in the study of ancient sexualities, to which Verboven refers, owe very little to psychoanalysis and much more to an exchange between Foucauldian analysis, sociology as inspired by Bourdieu and comparative anthropology.

A history of ancient mentality, which would indeed be my objective, obviously needs psychological concepts, and hence a methodology as to how to apply them. There are, I think, on the whole two ways in which we might proceed:

1) The conflict between emic and etic notions and *dito* analysis is not to be solved into a synthesis, but is accepted as a significant aspect of the question. The different sides of the issue are described and interpreted with different means (for instance, hermeneutic and psychoanalytical approaches respectively), each acknowledging the necessity of a poly-paradigmatic approach to render and understand the complexities of history.⁶

2) Anthropology could play an important role for ancient history, as it has so often done, acting as a go-between when historians ask modern questions about ancient societies (see also Verboven's remarks on non-western economy). Even if anthropology itself has wrestled with psychoanalysis in a way similar to history from Malinowski's critique of Freud onward, it may be possible to create a psychological vocabulary which is suited to pre-modern and non-western cultures.⁷ I think some psychoanalytical concepts might be very useful, notably such as the primary processes and mechanisms of defence. Yet this would emphatically require a new interpretation and experimental use of these concepts, in an open-minded discussion between historians, anthropologists and psychoanalysts. That is what I mean by saying that satisfactory solutions need to be worked at from both sides. Such an

6. For a vindication of a poly-paradigmatic approach, cf. H.S. Versnel (1993: 228-288).

7. For the problems and possibilities of an intercultural epistemology: cf. W.M.J. van Binsbergen (1999), with extensive bibliography on the conflict of emic and etic perspectives. For a recent view on the sense of interior self as created through dialogue in ancient Greek context: cf. C. Gill (1996).

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enterprise is well worth the effort, and this conference is certainly an important step in that direction.

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