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Book Review

**Mark Solms (2021) The Hidden Spring. Journey to the Source of Consciousness.
Italian Translation: edited by Andrea Clarici. Solms, M. La fonte nascosta. Un
viaggio alle origini della coscienza. Milan: Adelphi Editions, 2023**

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Scientific production in psychology, especially in intersection with neurobiology, encompasses a vast array of methodologically impeccable works, rigorous research, and sophisticated statistical elaborations. Often, however, these publications demonstrate a narrow scope, a limited perspective, and do not appear to possess significant implications in our daily lives, nor sufficient scientific robustness. This tendency towards fragmentation of knowledge in postmodern sciences may reflect what Francois Lyotard (1979) defined as a short-range plural rationality, with fluid and reversible legitimations. Fortunately, Mark Solms' *The Hidden Spring* is a text that does not conform to this logic; furthermore, it offers something new: the desired exception. It is a book that broadens horizons, both personal and in knowledge, in constructing a model (starting from the neuropsychanalytic one) that can guide both clinical practice and research. The book ventures into reflecting on what is perhaps the most complex theme in scientific and philosophical traditions, which Solms himself, paraphrasing Sophocles' quote from Oedipus Rex, defines as the *ancient riddle*: that *what-it-is-like-to-be* us, *i.e.*, the enigma of consciousness.

Solms first and foremost recognizes the legacies of great thinkers of the past (primarily Freud), treating their inheritances with the freedom that only true "offspring" can allow themselves, and that, with gratitude, they continue the same path started by their predecessors. *The Hidden Spring* is a book that truly embraces a multidisciplinary approach, allowing us to embark on this journey of knowledge at the intersection of psychoanalysis, neurology, information physics, biology, and ethology. It reveals itself as a text in which the pleasure of thinking and searching is felt, not disconnected from the effort that this entails.

In the introductory chapter, Solms openly declares the objectives of his work: "My task in this book is to persuade you of the plausibility of an alternative interpretation. This requires me to convince you that feelings are part of nature, that they are not fundamentally different from other natural phenomena, and that they *do* something within the causal matrix of things. Consciousness, I will demonstrate, is about feeling, and feeling, in turn, is about how well or badly you are doing in life. Consciousness exists to help you do better" (pp. 3-4). Consciousness thus indicates "the ability to make choices under conditions of uncertainty through the subjective conferment of qualities - affects - to objects of experience" (Solms, 2021; p. 162). Consciousness essentially means the ability to choose, the freedom to experience, to make mistakes, and to correct our errors: it is the prerequisite of free will, a faculty of choice centered on the vicissitudes of emotions, and not - at least primarily - on rational cognitive processes.

Furthermore, the author reveals that this textual "score" is not exclusively his own; it is, in fact, a transcription of an "ideal quartet" performed with three other distinguished scientists, inspired by works carried out separately and independently from each other: Panksepp, Friston, and Merker. Jaak Panksepp has been, for a long time, Solms' main scientific ally and one of the most important scholars of the animal physiology of emotions and feelings. Panksepp identified the existence of an ancestral core of emotional consciousness that underlies any form of psychic activity, both conscious and unconscious. This primordial affective consciousness, fundamentally different from reflective (cortical) consciousness, depends on the activity of deep and ancient brain regions (referred to as the *core self*), which humans share with other animals, at least with mammals (although its anatomical and physiological constituents, such as the reticular formation and the periaqueductal gray, appear to be present in all vertebrates). Panksepp's research indicates that mental activity, from its origins and at its deepest levels, is a conscious activity, intrinsically affective and therefore finalised (in the sense of maintaining the integrity and functional organization of the organism). The second contributor to this ensemble

who has greatly influenced Solms' work is undoubtedly Karl Friston, the neuroscientist and information physicist who introduced the principle of free energy as a unifying axiom of brain activity. The final (but not less important) contribution to this score on consciousness comes from the ethologist Bjorn Merker, who, through the study of children affected by a rare malformation (hydroanencephaly, which entails the total absence of the cerebral cortex), confirmed to Solms that he was on the right track: consciousness is primarily and above all affective, and affects originate at the level of specific and well-defined subcortical deep structures.

We will not attempt to summarize in a few lines the contents of the twelve chapters of the book, which begins with the most "classical" topic (at least for the psychoanalytic reader) such as dreams, albeit overturning the neurological knowledge that considered dreams inseparable from REM sleep, and ends with a completely new and daring theme: the possibility of constructing an artificial conscious mind. We limit ourselves to sharing some thoughts that may intrigue the reader.

At some point, more or less extensively, we have all pondered the meaning of life, and perhaps some have concluded their reflections (more or less satisfied by their result), by considering that the meaning of life is life itself. In this book, we find good reasons to think so. Solms tells us that we, like all mammals and all self-organizing organisms, have a goal, which is to survive. To do this, all our systems (including the mental apparatus) must be able to regulate themselves to stay within well-defined vital bounds. Our body is equipped with various homeostatic systems that function inwardly (through autonomic vegetative reflexes) or outwardly (through automatic reflexes of skeletal muscles). This evolutionarily older automatic activity is the most reliable and generalizable. However, these processes do not work in every circumstance and indefinitely over time, as the contextual environment changes. There are also situations where our responses, our automated predictions, are not available or simply do not work in a given context. There is a gap, an uncertainty, an error that becomes a demand for work, made by our body in need, to our mind. Evolution has left us with emotional structures that allow us to affectively perceive and weigh these predictive errors, assigning a precise value: the *specific affect* (i.e., when our blood energy main supply - glucose - decrease over a certain limit, *we feel hungry*, urging us to find a source of nourishment). Consciousness comes into play when an automatic response is not available, and we must make choices based on a psychobiological system of values that increase the chances of survival and reproduction. In the oldest portions of our organism, structures have evolved that not only measure the errors we make in our broadcasting and interpretation of the world but also determine which errors to trust more and which to neglect in order to

make the best choice for survival. Affective consciousness comes into play here in assigning a value in terms of signal reliability, to a particular event, or situation. Emotions are the propellers that drive consciousness: in fact, these deviations from the usual affective parameters, consciously perceived as a feeling, are named *drives*. Feelings are always the conscious expression of a need, a lack, or of a suffering. The ideal state is satiety, saturation of the need, obtained through the accuracy of predictions, also modulated through learning from experience, processes that include the consolidation and reconsolidation (updating) of memories.

Thus, our survival involves ancient brain structures: the brainstem, the periaqueductal gray (PAG), the amygdala, the hippocampi, the basal ganglia, the reticular formation, and the limbic system. All these structures work in concert with the more recent portions of the cerebral cortex in a complex integration of instincts, primary emotions, drives, inhibitions and impulse regulation, innate predictions, learning, memories, fantasies, dreams, and metacognition, in a mutual regulation from the periphery to the centers (or *bottom-up*, as occurs during developmental learning), along with a parallel *top-down* regulation (from the centers to the periphery) to avoid having to re-learn the world from scratch each time (Panksepp and Solms, 2012). Consciousness is central to our survival, but the ideal state is when it is not necessary: when things are going well, we can simply go on living.

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