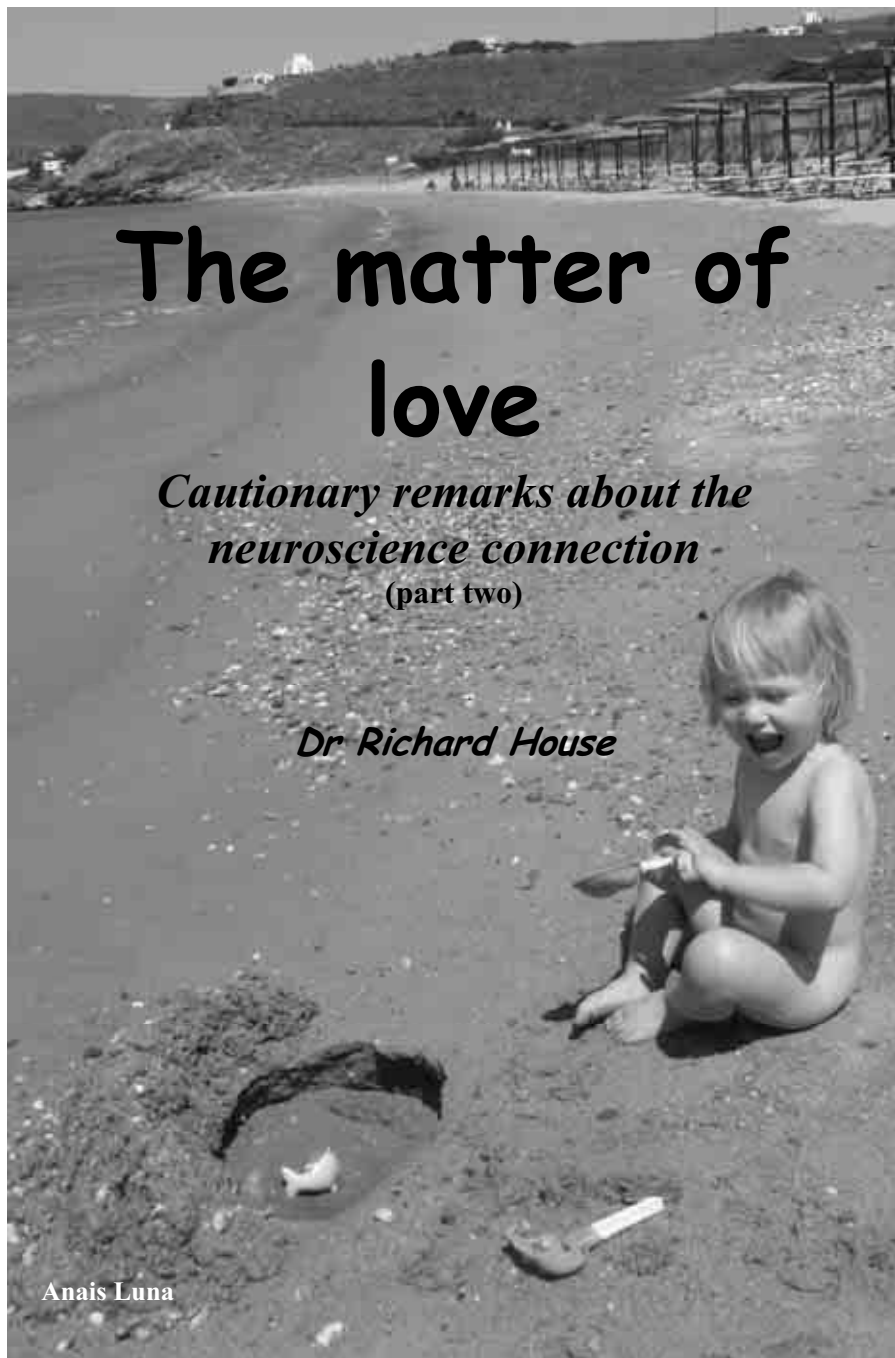


DR RICHARD HOUSE is a trained Steiner Kindergarten and class teacher, a senior lecturer in psychotherapy and counselling at Roehampton University, London, and a compulsive writer – especially for *The Mother* magazine. Correspondence: richardahouse@hotmail.com



The matter of love

Cautionary remarks about the neuroscience connection
(part two)

Dr Richard House

Anais Luna

A one-sided materialism insinuates itself everywhere and into everything, including the very last place it belongs – the simple love of a parent for their child.

My wide-ranging article in the previous issue of TM about love, determinism and modernity was a bit on the philosophical side; but there was a practical intent – now I'll outline the nature of my concerns. A number of writers have written about the neurosciences in recent years – for the latter is a burgeoning and exciting area of hard-scientific investigation. These new neuroscientific findings have, in turn, been used by all manner of writers – including those in the fields of psychoanalysis and early learning. Now, I don't have any particular problem with the latest scientific findings being mined in this way to buttress our own particular viewpoints and positions – indeed, I do it myself. Yet, I must admit to experiencing small pangs of discomfort, and even guilt, when I do it, as it certainly can sometimes feel like a rather opportunistic, expedient move to make – as if I will seize upon any morsel of evidence from another field (in which I have little or no expertise) to support my own position. These are very subtle matters, of course, and there are no doubt times when this kind of move is appropriate and fitting; but I also think there may well be times when it isn't – and it's the latter than I'm interested in here – especially in the area of the neurosciences and early learning.

A colleague of mine also has strong views about how this is happening within the field of psychoanalysis. He describes it as people who are not neuroscientists using the findings of neuroscience to give credence to their views on something (in this case, psychoanalysis), yet without really understanding the nature of the field they are plundering for their own expedient purposes.

Funnily enough, just as I was sitting down to write this article, I received an e-mail from another colleague which speaks directly to this issue. He wrote, 'Although I do not share the philosophy that we are to be explained by hormones/genes, etc., this study is fascinating'... – which just about sums up the dilemma we are in when we use research like this from another field. The study he was referring to is at <http://www.muskingum.edu/~psych/psycweb/history/panksepp.htm>, and it is an extract relevant to play – I quote selectively from it:

"One of the most interesting contributions made by [Jack] Panksepp involves his research on play behaviour. Panksepp studies the play behaviour of rat pups in order to determine what function it serves in the development of the humans... Panksepp argues that the rat pups do not become aggressive when playing. He insists that they never progress beyond a playful state. Rat pups instigate play by pouncing on each other, followed by chasing and pinning..."

Panksepp argues that playing serves a deeper function than simple recreation. He contends play factors in to optimal brain development. He claims that playing behaviour releases opioids into the brain. Indeed, the frontal lobe of the brain grows as a response to playing behaviour... Panksepp hypothesises that the opioids released during play act to stimulate further play; eventually, the opioid level rises to a high enough level [sic?] to satisfy the need to play by inducing a feeling of 'social comfort'. Autistic children, whom detest being touched, let alone playing, have abnormally large amounts of opioids in their brain. Perhaps the opioids tell the brain that the child is already satisfied and engaged in social comfort, resulting in no further need to engage in social play....

... Panksepp's argues that children, like rat pups, need a few hours of rough and tumble play every day. Schools increasingly cut the time spent on recess and gym, thereby eliminating the time children engage in physical play.'

Looking through the eyes of love
Oscar and his big sister, Katie Ridway



And so on... I think you get the drift. What makes it so difficult to criticise this is that I completely agree with the conclusions reached! (The piece also goes on to say very interesting things about so-called ADHD.) For my current purposes, what is interesting in the above is the following statement: 'He claims that playing behaviour releases opioids into the brain... Panksepp hypothesises that *the opioids released during play, act to stimulate further play*; eventually, *the opioid level rises high enough to satisfy the need to play by inducing a feeling of 'social comfort'*' (my italics). Notice how the language used quite clearly states that it is *the opioids* that stimulate further play, and also it is suggested that it is the opioid level that induces a feeling of social comfort. I have major problems with this – first, because of the linear causality that is invoked in the description (one discrete thing causing some other thing); and also (if we accept for a moment the linear-causal worldview), the *direction* of causality that is assumed i.e. that a chemical in the brain is causing certain humans' experience, rather than the (to me, far more plausible) view that the being and experience of a person have certain material *concomitants* in the brain, happening *alongside* the experience – not, therefore, assuming in any way that the latter somehow cause the former.

Now this might seem quite a trivial point, but I think it goes to heart of the materialistic worldview or paradigm in which we are still so caught up. You may know that it is indeed (Professor) Jack Panksepp's work that is most often invoked when early-childhood writers use neuroscientific research to support their views on early learning, etc. I will briefly quote from several recent texts from this genre, all written by champions of holistic early childhood for whom I have the

greatest admiration in their popularising of a holistic approach to childhood. First, here is Sue Gerhardt, from her book *Why Love Matters*: 'Through its links with the orbitofrontal cortex, *the hippocampus* can evaluate situations and anticipate their outcomes' (my italics).

And Margot Sunderland in her equally important book *The Science of Parenting*: 'When you help your child with his big feelings, a great number of cells in his higher brain start to form pathways connecting with those in the lower brain... *These networks...* [will enable] him to think about his feelings, rather than just discharging them' (my italics).

And finally, here is Maria Robinson in her recent *Nursery World* article 'The beautiful brain': 'Our brains are *the source of who we are* because our experiences... really do physically change our brains, influencing our motivation, curiosity, emotional well-being, and capacity to play and learn.'

I could give many more, and probably much better, examples. The key point here is that it is

not *the person* who is being seen as the seat of choice, volition and experience, but what is happening in their brain. Do we *really* believe that this is how human beings work?

Some might argue that if we are to succeed in having our ideas accepted in the mainstream, then it is acceptable to 'use' the latest (neuro) scientific findings in this way, even if we are a bit loose with the terminology and the philosophy. I find this a very difficult one – for *do* the ends justify these particular means? – the age-old utilitarian conundrum! I must say that there are very few cases in life where I personally embrace the view that the ends justify the means (for me, for example, animal experimentation is a paradigm case; the idea of an animal or animals being tortured to death by scientists in order to give me a longer life is absolutely abhorrent to me). Similarly, in this case, my own view, right or wrong, is that one-sided materialistic, causal-deterministic thinking, and all that goes with it, is at the root of our malaise; and the act of writing something that reinforces that malaise – albeit unwittingly – does more net harm than does any beneficent effect that might come from the use of materialistic thinking to support a holistic worldview.

I hope my intent will have become clear by now. I am concerned that the findings of (for example) neuroscience are not used in an uncritically materialistic way in order to support positions which should be going *beyond* mere materialism; and worse, to use findings in this way actually has the effect – albeit unwittingly, perhaps – of reinforcing a narrowly materialistic understanding of human life, and concomitantly, denying any place (let alone a central one) for the spiritual.

So I guess the conclusion of this short article is to urge caution on us all when we read texts that are broadly sympathetic to our holistic viewpoints. A one-sided materialism, being the guiding myth of our time that it still is, insinuates itself everywhere and into everything, including the very last place it belongs – the simple love of a parent for their child.

Dafni and Anais Luna

