

Questioning the Unconscious

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Is there an unconscious? This question has generally been posed and answered in a binary form. After centuries of disputation, one could draw up a lengthy list of illustrious protagonists lined up on either side of the aisle. One could further subdivide and classify the types of arguments used in favour of the existence of the unconscious, and the types of refutations. The initial binary form of this debate is further complicated by the multiplicity of models of the unconscious that have been proposed, and the explicit, or implicit models of the unconscious proposed in any given refutation. Furthermore, veritable battles have raged between proponents of different models of the unconscious. One could imagine a complex Linnean taxonomy of the different unconsciouss, complete with a genealogical table of lineages, branchings, hybrids and variations. There are no signs of any increasing consensus emerging between the competing conceptions of the unconscious, rather an ongoing process of spontaneous generation of yet more conceptions.

From the standpoint of intellectual history, such classificatory projects would doubtless serve as useful aids to clarification, assisting both proponents and opponents in being clear as to precisely what they are referring to, in the conceptual Babel and confusion of tongues that surrounds much talk of the unconscious. At the same time, the need for such projects raises the question of whether there is much continued utility in continuing to consider this question in the binary form in which it has generally been posed up till now: or even, whether there remains much point in proposing new conceptions of the unconscious, given the vast stockpile of models which have already been developed, and correspondingly,

whether there is any need to develop new refutations, given the range of arguments which have already been deployed.

Within the binary form of this question, there is no independent criterion for adjudication: the protagonists themselves propose their own 'rules of the game,' which are usually incommensurable with those of their opponents, and by which, unsurprisingly, they have deemed themselves to have won. We are faced then with an endless agonistic debate for which there appears to be no possibility for the matter to be finally settled in any remotely consensual manner.

Perhaps then, one should rethink the very terms of the question and ask whether it might be more useful to reconsider it, or even to set it to one side. For regardless of whether one could crown anyone on either side of this debate as the ultimate winner, the unconscious 'exists,' as the Durkheimians might put it, as a 'social fact': there are by now countless individuals who have attested, and continue to attest, on the basis of personal testimony, to have an unconscious, while at the same time, there are countless other individuals who would deny having an unconscious, and who utilise other terms by which to understand themselves, and others. Consequently, it is valuable to approach the study of concepts of the unconscious, how they have been developed, taken up, and rejected, from the standpoint of other disciplinary modes of enquiry: such as history, anthropology and the health humanities. For more than a century, psychology has sought to understand human behaviour. It is now timely to attempt to turn the lens upon psychology itself, to view it from the outside, to study its theories and practices as intrinsically historically and culturally specific formations, whatever their claims to universality. It is only in such a way that its effects upon society can begin to be mapped.

Let us first briefly review the history of concepts of the unconscious. As a concept,

the ‘unconscious’ is inseparable from that of ‘consciousness,’ and throughout its history, has variously figured as an extension, supplement, or opposite to particular conceptions of consciousness. As a further division or stratification of a dualistic framework, it ultimately forms a sub-chapter within the larger history of concepts of consciousness. Its initial developments took place in German philosophy, commencing with Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz’s (1646-1716) notion of the ‘petites perceptions,’ perceptions which were too small to be perceived, but which determined our behaviour without our thinking of them. An example would be when one heard the sound of waves, it followed that one was affected by the sound of each wave, which were too faint to be heard individually. It was in post-Kantian idealism that the unconscious underwent its most extensive development. For Friedrich Schelling (1775-1854), the unconscious was conceived as the productive force or ground of consciousness. Consciousness was equated with volition, and the unconscious with the involuntary. The heyday of the unconscious was in nineteenth century German philosophy. While the concept of consciousness waned, that of the unconscious waxed. In the philosophies of Carl Gustav Carus (1789-1869) and Eduard von Hartmann (1842-1906), much of what had previously been ascribed to memory, imagination or the passions increasingly became ascribed to the unconscious. Many mental functions now had ‘un’ prefix attached to them. However, the content of the unconscious was generally conceived as representations - the key term, paradoxically, of the philosophy of consciousness. With each successive edition of von Hartmann’s best-selling *Philosophy of the Unconscious*, the unconscious itself expanded.¹

¹ Eduard von Hartmann, *Philosophie des Unbewussten: Versuch ein Weltanschauung*, (Berlin, C. Dunker, 1869); *The Philosophy of the Unconscious*, tr. W. Coupland, (London, R. Paul, Trench & Trubner, 1900/1931).

Alongside these philosophical developments, concepts of the unconscious were developed in nineteenth century British physiology, through an expansion of the concept of reflex action. Under the rubric of ‘unconscious cerebration,’ William Carpenter (1813-1855) maintained that a large proportion of mental activity took place automatically, which was unconscious. At the same time in German biology, notions of organic memory arose, based on Jean Baptiste Lamarck’s (1744-1829) theory of the inheritance of acquired characteristics and Ernst Haeckel’s (1834-1919) biogenetic law, that ontogeny recapitulated phylogeny. Through figures such as Ewald Hering (1834-1918), transindividual and collective concepts of the unconscious were developed, wherein the unconscious was seen to contain and transmit the history of the race.

For the new dynamic psychologies at the end of the nineteenth century, the unconscious presented an ideal term. It was a site where new universal laws could be discovered and where periodic tables could be established. It enabled them to delineate their own domain of the mind and people it with a plethora of objects, mechanisms and special modes of functioning. This ‘inner’ world vastly expanded. The unconscious of the psychologists had to be differentiated from that of the philosophers, to enable it to be presented as a scientific concept. In most cases, this was simply accomplished through a denial of filiation. There was little that could not be explained via the unconscious: dreams, delusions, passions, inspirations, and even religious experience. These developments did not pass uncontested: in 1890, in *The Principles of Psychology*, William James commented that the distinction between the consciousness and the unconsciousness of a mental state was “the sovereign means for believing what one likes in psychology, and of turning what might be a science into a tumbling-ground for whimsies.”² One may note that James did not limit his

² William James, *The Principles of Psychology*, (London, Macmillan, 1918, vol. 1), p.

critique to the unconscious: he came to discard the notion of consciousness, in favour of a monistic metaphysics of radical empiricism, noting in 1904 that “those who still cling to it are clinging to a mere echo, the faint rumour left behind by the disappearing ‘soul’ upon the air of philosophy.”³

As the basis for an explanation of psychopathology, the unconscious was taken up for a while in twentieth century psychiatry, and more widely within psychotherapy, where it became a means of explaining human behaviour in general and a new source for self-knowledge, which increasingly came to signify knowledge of what was unconscious, in some shape or form, to the self. Interpretation generally took the form of the translation of conduct into the theoretical language of the unconscious. In the twentieth century, the unconscious became institutionalised, spawning a sizeable network of associations, guilds and training societies. Supported by the motor of therapeutic practice, theories of the unconscious have functioned in a productive way: far from being perpetually rediscovered and uncovered in a positivistic manner, the psychological unconscious was an artifact raised and reared in the therapeutic clinic. Theories of the unconscious, like many other psychological theories, do not only function as descriptions, but also act as theatrical scripts, stage directions and modes of emplotment, utilising particular narrative strategies. It would be useful to study these from the perspective of literary theory.

However, this is by no means to say that the unconscious produced by such operations is illusory, unreal, or merely fictitious. Psychologies and psychotherapies have generated a plethora of what I term ‘optional ontologies’ through which individuals have come to rescript

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³ William James, “Does consciousness exist?” (1904), *Essays in Radical Empiricism*, (Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, 1996), p. 2.

their lives. 'The' unconscious has been one of the most prominent of these. As such, it has become one of the most powerful artefacts of modern psychology and psychotherapeutics.

From this perspective, one may raise the question of what type of objects such unconscious are, and what uses they have been put to. In this regard, concepts of the unconscious clearly had significant epistemological and professional utility, which was interconnected. The unconscious was conceived as a natural object, which was transhistorical and cross-cultural. For psychoanalysts, everyone whoever lived must have had an unconscious, and furthermore, one whose laws had been discovered and laid down by Freud. There was no place for cultural variation, or the possibility of accepting that other people and cultures might have equally compelling alternative ontological conceptions and effective narratives of sickness and healing with no need for an unconscious. Consequently, historical and cross-cultural variations were nullified. With the unconscious, psychologists had their own epistemological object, with its particular laws, processes and modes of functioning, just like other natural sciences, with compendious grammars of interpretive rules, which required special modes of training and instruction to be initiated into. This gave the impression that the epistemological and disciplinary separation of psychology from other disciplines has been successfully negotiated.

Within theories of psychotherapy, notions of the unconscious led to conceptions that the task of the psychotherapist lay in uncovering partially recessed unconscious representations which were concealed to the subject themselves but visible to the psychotherapist, whose task was one of transcribing behaviour into the theoretical language of the unconscious. As such, the unconscious became a manner of rescripting the narrative description of a life, and a mode of hermeneutics for giving it significance. This language clearly did not remain a professional preserve, and was taken on by large social groupings,

for whom it became a compelling form of self-description. The unconscious became a social idiom, entering the vernacular.

Consequently, continuing to pose the question of whether the unconscious exists or not doesn't help very much, for whatever one's views on this may be, we faced today with a situation where large bodies of people consider that they (and others) have an unconscious, and larger bodies of people consider that they (and others) don't. Geographically speaking, it would be possible in an approximate sense to chart this on a map upon which one would in all likelihood see the greatest density of individuals 'with an unconscious' conglomered around the European and American metropolises, with a minimal density in the so-called developing nations, such as Africa, China and India. The geographical distribution immediately raises the question of ethnocentricity, and the status of forms of thought that may have not been nurtured on the particular conceptual developments that took place, for instance, in nineteenth-century German philosophy, or where psychology and psychotherapy have not had major societal impacts.

Given this situation, it would be useful to imagine how an anthropology of psychology might envisage such questions. For instance, one might ask, how does one come to acquire an unconscious? Is there greater susceptibility among particular age groups? Are there typical conversion experiences which give rise to the conviction of the reality of a particular unconscious? Why do people choose a particular type of unconscious? How do people try out different unconsciouses? What leads one to lose an unconscious? What effects, beneficial or otherwise, has living with an unconscious had on people's lives, in their own estimation? How does the unconscious compare with other optional ontologies? As Edward Sapir and Benjamin Lee Whorf observed years ago, the terms and linguistic differentiations available to us are by no means neutral, and may generate particular forms of experience.

This suggests that one may fruitfully explore the particular phenomenology of ‘living with an unconscious.’

To conceive of individuals as choosing to have an unconscious, is, I contend, descriptive of what regularly occurs. Such a choice is by nature paradoxical, and in effect cancels itself out: it is to accede to a state of affairs which conceals the elective element. For if one contends that everyone who lives, has lived or will live inevitably has, had or will have an unconscious, there plainly cannot be any choice involved. There is no ‘opt-out’ clause, no intrinsic right to any other form of self-description, which are readily relegated to the status of illusions or delusions. The world is then divided simply into those who recognise that they have an unconscious, and those who have an unconscious but fail to recognise that they have one. Conversely, for those who deny the existence of the unconscious, the world is divided into those who recognise this state of affairs, and others who cling to an illusory phantasm.

By contrast, the recognition of the factor of choice restores the active role of agency, and so acknowledges the right, on the one hand, for an individual to have an unconscious if they so desire, and also, for others not to. At a socio-political level, such a democratising recognition of the multiplicity of ontologies and models of self-understanding that exist in a society at any given time is surely a better way to increase tolerance of difference. Such tolerance: according to the other the basic right to their own form of self-understanding, in this instance, to have, or not to have, an unconscious, is surely a necessary step towards understanding them in their own terms, and fostering peaceful coexistence in these fraught times.

Further Reading

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