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THE UNCONSCIOUS MIND

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INTRODUCTION

The concept of the unconscious is now so firmly associated with Sigmund Freud that an alternative conception of the unconscious, one which is not in some way dependent on or derived from that of psychoanalysis, is hard to imagine at present. Yet, as studies of the prehistory of psychoanalysis emphasise, by no means did Freud introduce the concept from scratch: already by 1900, when *Die Traumdeutung* (*The Interpretation of Dreams*) appeared, the unconscious was a well-established intellectual topic (the classic studies of psychoanalysis's ancestry are Ellenberger 1970 and Whyte 1979; see also Brandell 1979: ch. 8, Decker 1977: ch. 9, and Ellenberger 1993: chs. 1–2; Freud's debts are acknowledged in Jones 1953: I, 435–6). Throughout the period 1870 to 1914 the concept of the unconscious was, however, in comparison with its psychoanalytic version, indeterminate in several respects. This reflects its deep involvement with two broader issues in later nineteenth-century philosophy, namely the disentangling of psychology as an autonomous discipline from philosophy, and the opposition between ascendant materialistic naturalism and the contrary impulse to preserve something of the metaphysical systems which had dominated the first three decades of the century (for a different suggestion as to why the unconscious appeared in Western thought, see Foucault 1966 [1974: 326–7]).

THE CONCEPT OF THE UNCONSCIOUS

The concept of the unconscious entered the scene in the latter half of the nineteenth century from two directions. First, unconscious mental entities and processes were explicitly postulated many times over in the context of nascent empirical psychology. Unconscious ideas were affirmed in Johann Friedrich Herbart's dynamic conception of ideas as inhibited but not destroyed by mental conflict, and as reaching consciousness on the condition of adequate strength and clarity (Herbart 1816 and 1824, esp. §§41–3; on Herbart, see Boring 1929

[1950: 245–61]; another early and influential source is Stewart 1792: ch. 2). Subsequently they appeared in Gustav Theodor Fechner's elaboration of the notion of a threshold of awareness and theory of its relation to the intensity of sensation (Fechner 1860: I, esp. ch. 10; on Fechner, see Boring 1929 [1950: ch. 14]). Decisively, the concept of unconscious inference, which goes a step beyond the postulation of mere unconscious ideas, was introduced by Hermann von Helmholtz in his analysis of perceptual knowledge, where it is made the key to spatial awareness, and it played a central role in the early writings of Wilhelm Wundt.[1] And in many other contexts theorists saw the need to refer to mental states and processes that exceed the immediate given data of introspective consciousness. As the discipline of psychology defined and consolidated itself, the references became more frequent.[2] In most of these writings, however, unconscious mental states are thought of as states which are not objects of consciousness, rather than, as in Freud, states which cannot become such. A distinctive school of psychological theory formed around Janet's notion of *désagrégation* (dissociation), although it was unclear what relation the concept of dissociation bears to that of the unconscious, Janet preferring the term subconscious (*sous-conscience*) (see Janet 1889, esp. pp. 190ff. and pt. II, ch. 1, and 1907–8; and Münsterberg *et al.* 1911; on Janet, see Ellenberger 1970: ch. 6). It is safe to assume that most if not all of these authors would have been known to Freud, whether directly or indirectly. For example, Freud says in letters of 1898 that he is reading Lipps (Freud 1954: Letters 94, 95, 97), whom he discusses in *The Interpretation of Dreams* (Freud 1800 [1960: V, 611–15).

Notions of the unconscious were also introduced in metaphysical contexts, the chief and most spectacular instance being Eduard von Hartmann's *Philosophie der Unbewußten* (*Philosophy of the Unconscious*) – a work no longer read, but which, measured in terms of its reception by the broader public, must be counted as one of the most successful in the history of nineteenth-century philosophy. Here the unconscious was associated with a very different cultural tendency, namely the surge of interest in Schopenhauer and the recrudescence of romanticism (in a novel, pessimistic form) in the late nineteenth century (on Schopenhauer's growing fame in the second half of the nineteenth century, see Henry 1988 and

[1] Helmholtz 1855, 1856–67, vol. III, and 1894, and Wundt 1862, p. 65 and ch. 6; on Helmholtz, see Boring 1950: ch. 15, and Mandelbaum 1971: 292–8: on Wundt, Boring 1929 [1950: ch. 16]; the idea of unconscious inference goes back to J. S. Mill: see Mill 1843: II, bk. 6, ch. 4, discussed in Reed 1997: ch. 7.

[2] See Baldwin 1891: 93ff.; Butler 1880; Clifford 1878; Galton 1883: 203ff.; Lewes 1875: 126–7, 139ff., and 1874: I, 134–46 and II, problem 3, ch. 2; Lipps 1883 and 1897; Lotze 1854–64: I, bk. II, ch. 3, §§12–14 and bk. III, ch. 3, §5 [1885: I, 196–214 and 324–32] and 1884: pt. I, ch. 3, pt. II, ch. 6; Maudsley 1867: ch. 1; Prince 1906, 1907–8, and 1914 (esp. Lecture 8); Ribot 1881: ch. 1 and 107ff. 1889 [1890: 112–17] and 1914; Taine 1870 (e.g. I, 165ff. and 332ff.), and Ward 1893.

Wallace 1890: pp. 189ff.; public interest in Schopenhauer in Britain began with a review of his œuvre in the *Westminster Review* 1853: 388–407).

With qualification, these two sources can be thought of as giving rise respectively to psychological and philosophical conceptions of the unconscious. Qualifications are needed, first because psychologists, particularly in Germany, conceived their theories as integral to the philosophical task of analysing the conditions of human knowledge (Helmholtz for example was a Neo-Kantian, psychological enquiry being on his account the correct means of effecting the Copernican Revolution); and second because the conception of metaphysics in Hartmann, inherited from Arthur Schopenhauer (most clearly exemplified in Schopenhauer 1836), allowed metaphysical results to be based upon those of the natural sciences, which meant that a metaphysical concept of the unconscious could be supported by psychological research. The distinction between psychological and philosophical grounds for postulating the unconscious had no firm place in the self-conceptions of the time.

The use made by Helmholtz and others of the concepts of unconscious ideas and inferences belongs, strictly, to the history of psychology (see Boring 1929 [1950: chs. 13–18]; Littman 1979; Murray 1983: chs. 5–8; Reed 1997: chs. 4–7, 10; Robinson 1981: ch. 11). Essentially its theoretical motivation is the same as that of contemporary sub-personal cognitive science. Once it had been resolved that the mind should be made an object of scientific study on the model supplied by the material natural sciences, it was inevitable that psychological concepts defined with indifference to consciousness, in some cases by explicit analogy with the theoretical entities of physics, would be introduced. The immediate background to nineteenth-century psychology was supplied chiefly by the legacy of Locke, and the limitations of what could be achieved within the empiricist framework of associationism were well known; they had been exposed, albeit in highly abstract terms, by Immanuel Kant (even though Kant's warnings against confusing epistemology with empirical investigation were ignored by Helmholtz, as they had been by Herbart). Hence, given the undeveloped state of physiology until late in the nineteenth century, which ruled out direct explanation of conscious events by neurological causes, some investment in psychological entities outside consciousness would be needed if psychology were to make headway and not to remain a merely descriptive discipline.

Hartmann's philosophy of the unconscious, by contrast, requires considerable historical reconstruction in order to become intelligible from a late twentieth-century perspective. The sub-title of his main work – *Versuch einer Weltanschauung* (*Attempt at a World-View*) (1869) – signals his distance from the relatively circumscribed project of empirical psychology. Hartmann's overarching intention is to allow the opposing systems of G. W. F. Hegel and Schopenhauer, each of which

he regards as expressing a partial truth, to be rendered consistent and fruitfully integrated.[3] Accordingly, the world is envisaged by Hartmann as a teleological whole with two interdependent but mutually irreducible aspects. On the one hand, the world is, as in Schopenhauer, will, a process of striving which manifests itself in the kinds and particulars of organic nature. Hartmann argues (1869 [1931: I, 30, 117ff.]), however, that will presupposes, an end, which is supplied by the Hegelian Idea, the unity of will and idea comprising in Hartmann's language, borrowed from F. W. J. von Schelling, the Unconscious (1869 [1931: I, 4–5, 28–9, II, 55–61]; see Schelling 1800 [1993: 58–9, 75–9, 203–36]).

Hartmann's construction of his picture follows what he calls an 'inductive' method (1869 [1931: I, 6–15]), whereby the existence of the unconscious is established initially through a wide-ranging survey of natural phenomena, including instinctual behaviour in animals and physical pathology, extending to an analysis of human sexual and moral behaviour, language, aesthetic experience, and so on (1869 [1931: I]). In each case Hartmann argues that mechanical causality fails to provide a complete explanation, which requires reference to ends which must be represented and yet are not conscious (1869 [1931: I, 98, 113]). On the basis of this empirical warrant, Hartmann differentiates the hypothesised unconscious into several kinds (physiological, psychic, metaphysical), culminating in the absolute unconscious, which shares in the attributes of God (1869 [1931: II, 245ff.]).

At one level, Hartmann's system appears to have advantages over those of Hegel and Schopenhauer. The (frequently supposed) difficulty of understanding Hegel's conception of a development of thought which is at the same time the development of reality – of understanding in what sense concepts can 'move' – does not arise for Hartmann, because of his interpretation of this process on the model of agency (Hegel's Idea is assimilated to a subject with practical reason). Similarly, a question which arises for Schopenhauer, as to why the world-will should objectify itself in individuated nature, is answered by the Hegelian component of Hartmann's system, the dependence of will on representation. To that extent, Hartmann uses Hegel and Schopenhauer to solve one another's problems. At another level, however, Hartmann's own system faces a problem, since it provides no answer to the question why the absolute Unconscious should give rise to a world (see 1869 [1931: II, 271–5]: the Unconscious has no attributes apart from that of the individuals in which it manifests itself). Hartmann cannot, like Schopenhauer, appeal to the a-rational character of will to bring explanation to an end, nor can he take over Hegel's claim that this end is supplied by

[3] See the preface to the eighth edition, 1869 [1931: xxx; see also III, 147]; Hartmann offers detailed accounts of his relations to his predecessors, 1869 [1931: I, 16–42, and III, 147–59].

the self-explaining concept. Instead, Hartmann effectively seeks to translate the metaphysical problem of explaining the existence of the represented world into the ethical problem of explaining the existence of evil, to which he responds with a doctrine of philosophical pessimism, more thoroughgoing than Schopenhauer's in so far as it teaches that the Unconscious is pure suffering and that the world's telos – for which consciousness evolved – is its own self-abolition (1869 [1931: II, 256–9, III, 123ff.]).

SCHOPENHAUER AND BERGSON

The use which Hartmann intends for the concept of the unconscious is highlighted by comparison with, first, Schopenhauer, and, second, another philosopher of a slightly later period who also had affinities with Schopenhauer and made explicit use of the concept of unconscious mental states, Henri Bergson.

Schopenhauer is widely noted as a precursor of Freud. In volume II of *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung* (*The World as Will and Representation*) Schopenhauer sketches many of the key elements of Freud's metapsychology, including the limited scope of consciousness, the subservience of consciousness and cognition to the will, the fallibility of self-knowledge, the existence of repression, the aetiology of madness, and the importance of sexuality (Schopenhauer 1844: chs. 14–15, 19, 22, 32, 42, 44; see Assoun 1976: pt. II, and Gardner 1999). Yet, the concept of the unconscious itself does not appear in Schopenhauer: there is nothing in his philosophy comparable to the explicit discussion of the Unconscious found in Schelling. The explanation for this lies in the fact that his concept of will, together with his conception of the world as a 'cryptograph' in which natural phenomena, human psychology included, could be interpreted as manifesting the constitution of an underlying reality (Schopenhauer 1844: II [1966: II, 182–5]), allowed Schopenhauer to arrive at a disenchanted view of the human psyche similar to that of Freud. The same programme – of interpreting human beings in terms that stand on the border of metaphysics and naturalistic explanation – is pursued in Friedrich Nietzsche, again with results that famously approximate to those of psychoanalysis and which became increasingly well known towards the turn of the century (Nietzsche's most sustained attempt in this direction is *Zur Genealogie der Moral*, 1887; on his relation to Freud, see Assoun 1980 and Lehrer 1995, esp. ch. 14).

Bergson, though well acquainted with empirical psychology and prepared to appropriate its results for philosophical ends, arrived at a conception of the unconscious on the basis of uniquely metaphysical considerations, and the claim that there are unconscious mental states has for him a quite distinctive meaning (Bergson 1896 [1991: 140–9; see also 67, 171, 176]). Consciousness, according

to Bergson, is the mark of the present, and so, on his analysis of the structure of time and the nature of mind, essentially an action-directed function. Hence it is an illusion (though an intelligible one, in so far as it reflects a more general illusion of the autonomy and priority of theoretical cognition) to suppose that consciousness is necessary to psychological states: in fact, for Bergson, consciousness is merely a condition enjoyed by states that engage with our practical interests. Representations, he holds, exist outside awareness in a manner precisely analogous to objects in space. Memory has this status.

Redolent though this may be of the atemporal Freudian unconscious – a comparison drawn by Bergson himself (1934 [1946: 75]: 'my idea of integral conservation of the past has more and more found its empirical verification in the vast collection of experiments instituted by the disciples of Freud') – the distance between the two conceptions is in fact enormous: not only does Bergson's account imply that unconscious states are ineffective, he also holds (due to his idealism) that the reality of the unconscious is equivalent to that of the material world at large. Bergson's conception of the unconscious evidently stands or falls with his philosophical system as a whole, and is disengaged from the problems of psychological explanation addressed by Freud (the 'ontological', non-psychological character of Bergson's unconscious is stressed in Deleuze 1966 [1991: 55–6, 71–2]).

The comparison with Schopenhauer and Bergson puts in focus the reason why Hartmann's vast system is not a living survivor in the history of philosophy. Hartmann's aim of synthesising the philosophies of the Idea and the Will requires them to be brought under a single principle which possesses an independent content and justification. There is, however, nothing in Hartmann's system comparable to Schopenhauer's account of will or Bergson's account of time which might give philosophical substance to his notion of the Unconscious. It remains the wholly indefinite concept of whatever it is that would provide a unitary ground for Hegelian and Schopenhauerian metaphysics, and his philosophical system reduces to an eclectic compendium (criticism of Hartmann by his contemporaries may be found in Brentano 1874 [1973: 103–9], and Lange 1873 [1925: bk. 2, 71–80]; on Hartmann, see Darnoi 1967 and Windelband 1892: §§44, 46).

CRITICS OF THE UNCONSCIOUS

It would be a mistake to suppose that the concept of the unconscious met no resistance in the pre-Freudian era. Examples of systematic critical discussions of the unconscious are found in Franz Brentano and William James. Each argues at length, with reference to writings of their contemporaries, that a broadly

empirical approach to psychological questions fails to uncover good reasons for hypothesising unconscious mental states. Brentano's discussion of unconscious mental phenomena (Brentano 1874: bk 2, ch. 2 [see also 1973: 56–9]) considers four possible lines of defence, the most familiar and promising being inference to unconscious mental phenomena as causes of conscious mental phenomena. Speculations of this form – Brentano cites instances from Sir William Hamilton, G. H. Lewes, Henry Maudsley, Hartmann, and Helmholtz – fail to fulfil the conditions of a successful inference, Brentano argues, in most cases because of the failure to rule out alternative explanations, in terms of dispositions to conscious mental states or the activation of pre-established associative connections (Brentano 1874 [1973: 105–16]; see e.g. Hartmann 1869 [1931: I, 98]). Brentano also stresses (here anticipating a standard criticism of psychoanalysis) the tension between the homogeneity of conscious and unconscious states which arguments of this form must presuppose, and the heterogeneity of conscious and unconscious mental processes which is characteristically asserted by theorists such as Hartmann who appeal to the unconscious for explanation of what cannot be explained by consciousness alone (Brentano adds a further, independent criticism of Hartmann's metaphysics as wholly lacking in rigour, 1874 [1973: 108–9]). Another, less familiar attempted justification of the unconscious considered by Brentano is an a priori argument turning on the claim that if all mental phenomena are conscious, i.e. objects of other mental phenomena, then an infinite (and vicious) regress of mental acts is generated (Brentano 1874 [1973: 121–37]). To this Brentano opposes his doctrine that each mental act is its own (secondary) object (1874 [1973: 127–8]), a reflexive conception of the mental which persists in the phenomenological tradition and underpins the criticism of Freudian ideas in phenomenology and existentialism (in addition to the well-known discussion in Sartre 1943 [1958: 50–4, 568ff.], see Merleau-Ponty 1945 [1962: 157–8], Scheler 1923 [1954: 196–209], and Henry 1985: ch. 9).

James covers similar territory to Brentano. The classic argument of G. W. Leibniz, that conscious perception of a whole presupposes unconscious perception of its perceptible parts (Leibniz 1765 [1981: 53–6 and 164–7]), is rejected by James as exemplifying the 'fallacy of division', and cases of habitual, automated intelligent behaviour are accounted for by him in terms of either conscious states which are instantly forgotten, or split-off consciousness (James 1890: I, ch. 6 [1950: 162–76]; James's discussion is very similar to that in Mill 1878: ch. 15). James regards Janet's conception of split consciousness as providing also the explanation of somnambulism and of the purported unconsciousness of hysterics (James 1890: I, ch. 6 [1950: 202–13]; see also ch. 10 [1950: 373ff.]). Where these forms of explanation come under pressure or give out, as in sequences of thought where links are absent from consciousness, James (here

departing from Brentano) refers to brain traces and the operations of the nervous system in place of unconscious ideation – 'there are all kinds of short-cuts in the brain' (James 1890: I [1950: 167]). Quasi-Freudian cases, where we seem to retrospectively self-ascribe motives and emotions previously unrecognised by us, are on James's analysis simply ones in which our mind has changed: the motive or emotion which we are now aware of did not in fact exist earlier (though some conscious fact closely related to it may have done so), and so need not be assumed to have previously taken an unconscious form. (James, however, later takes a different view of the unconscious in the context of religious experience: see James 1902 [1982: 233ff., 483ff., 511ff.].)

FREUD

Freud is sometimes said to have rendered the concept of the unconscious 'scientific' (e.g. Robinson 1981: 380), or at any rate to have made an attempt in the direction of genuine science, but this is not an especially helpful way of characterising the difference between psychoanalysis and earlier theories which gave application to the notion of unconscious mentality. The latter were no less guided by considerations of systematicity and empirical proof (Hartmann included, within his own terms). Rather, what Freud did was to take the idea that unconscious mental states and activities can legitimately be postulated in accordance with the demands of psychological explanation, and give it a novel, very much broader sphere of application, one that took in not only psychopathology but also the normal functions of dreams, sexuality, child development, adult motivation and so on – all of this material being subjected to a highly original form of holistic, interpretative scrutiny, anchored in the new clinical practice of the psychoanalytic session. Freud's primary innovation thus lay in the development of a new plane of psychological explanation, one that goes beyond commonsense psychology, not by appeal to experimental methods modelled on those of natural science, but by radically innovating selected elements taken from within everyday psychological knowledge and practice (see Wollheim 1991: Preface).

The image of Freud as having discovered the unconscious has a justification, therefore, in so far as he gave the concept a stability and empirical determinacy which it lacked previously. To the extent that any narrowly philosophical development may be associated with Freud, it lies in his having developed a conception of the unconscious mind as something more substantial than a mere aggregate of unconscious ideas or representations, but which does not amount to a second mind as such, and so does not (like Pierre Janet's theory of dissociation) take us full circle to a theory of split-off (subliminal, secondary, etc.) consciousness. (Freud's own philosophical defence of the concept of unconscious

mentality recapitulates what had been said before by Herbart, Hartmann, and others: see Freud 1912, 1915, and 1940: pt IV.)

The objections to talk of unconscious mentality levelled by Brentano and James could certainly, in principle, continue to be pressed against Freud, but not nearly as straightforwardly: the explanatory detail and integration of psychoanalytic theory, together with its reliance on a hermeneutical method which is only obliquely related to familiar instances of inductive reasoning, made it harder to refute the claim that postulation of the Freudian unconscious satisfies the conditions of inference to the best explanation. In fact, the bulk of the criticism directed at psychoanalysis in Freud's lifetime (when it did not revert, rather disingenuously, to a flat repudiation of the notion of the unconscious as absurd) took issue with his account of the content of human motivation, especially regarding the role of sexuality (see Decker 1977: chs. 3–4, esp. 95ff. and 123ff.); Freud's contemporary opponents did not in general seek to directly counter psychoanalytic claims by advancing explanations of the same phenomena in competing (neurophysiological or other psychological) terms.

Though Freud discarded all pretensions to metaphysical truth, and aligned himself unequivocally with the endeavour to make the human mind a topic of objective knowledge, he may be regarded as having persevered, in contrast with the other major schools of empirical psychology in this century, with the philosophical, Schopenhauerian, or Hartmannian, task of providing an interpretation of human existence (Decker 1977: 322ff., suggests that this aspect of psychoanalysis played a role in its negative reception). To the extent that psychoanalysis supports a *Weltanschauung* (see Freud 1933: Lecture 35), it may be said that the philosophical and psychological conceptions of the unconscious were brought together in Freud. That the traditional philosophical task of providing a synoptic account of man's situation should have been taken over by what is essentially an empirical theory of the individual mind is a measure of the degree to which, by the end of the nineteenth century, speculative ambition had faded from philosophy, and, lying immediately behind this development, natural science had achieved a cultural authority which allowed it to influence significantly the terms of intellectual enquiry – such that it now seems inevitable that a fully naturalistic conception of the unconscious such as Freud's would eclipse the compromised, scientific-cum-metaphysical sort advanced by Hartmann (for a contrasting view of the significance of the Freudian unconscious, see Henry 1985).