

THE DYNAMIC UNCONSCIOUS REVISITED:

*The Role of Motivation, Affect, Embodiment and Intersubjectivity in
Catching Ourselves Unawares*

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SUMMARY

Bringing to light a strand of Freud's thought not acknowledged in contemporary debate establishes a single epistemic view of unconscious processes which blurs the current sharp distinction between a cognitive unconscious and a dynamic unconscious. The difference is one of degree (of affective and motivational influences) rather than a difference in kind. In the laboratory there is no question as to why material is processed at an unconscious level, because fleeting presentation or "masking" ensures its unconscious status. The question is what plays this role in real-life? Affective and motivational influences are implicated both in rendering material dynamically unconscious and in the means by which the mind grasps at its own activity, in how the habitual becomes open to the possible. These concerns bring to the fore the role of embodiment and intersubjectivity as means by which we become consciously aware, they are discussed within a psychoanalytic theory of mind with implications for a comprehensive theoretical and empirical psychology.

INTRODUCTION

But what part is there left to be played in our scheme by consciousness, which was once so omnipotent and hid all else from view?
(Freud, 1900/1976, p. 776)

Consciousness has been both hailed as marker of our humanity and

dismissed as epiphenomenon. Therapeutic evidence claims conscious awareness as one avenue of rendering explicit previously automatic processes that may have been efficient in past circumstances, but which now have less than optimal outcomes. Unconscious processes have had a similarly troubled history, and while their existence is now accepted in the laboratory and the clinic, there is currently a lack of theoretical clarity concerning the unconscious/conscious divide. Too sharp a distinction between a cognitive unconscious and a dynamic unconscious, renders mysterious the further evidence required for material being dynamically unconscious. Or, having created two "systems", work must then be done to integrate them, (Epstein, 1994; Westen, 1992). There is a viable "epistemic" view of unconscious processes (Petocz, 1999), a strand of Freud's thought not acknowledged in contemporary debate whereby unconscious processes differ from conscious processes only as a result of their being unavailable to consciousness, which is not an ontological difference in kind. "This approach to unconscious mentality is consistent with the view of mentality (conscious or unconscious) which regards mental processes (knowing, believing, perceiving, remembering, etc.) as *relations* between a cognising subject and a state of affairs cognised" (Petocz, 1999, p. 162). The epistemic view of unconscious processes, I argue, encompasses phenomena currently attributed to both the cognitive unconscious and the dynamic unconscious.

Additional affective and motivational contingencies need to be addressed to show why (without postulating two separate systems) material might become unconscious in a dynamic sense. While this would require a philosophical reworking of the Freudian concept of repression (thankfully beyond the scope of this chapter), affects and drives are theoretically positioned in such a way that they are likely to afford us insights into the processes of material becoming conscious or unconscious. Both affects and drives are liminal between the bodily and the mental. They are physically underpinned, impel us into expressive action and towards others, and are intentional in that they point us towards the world. As such, they are of central importance to the means by which we become consciously aware. This chapter addresses how the mind grasps at its own activity, and what the consequences of this are for the system as a whole: the human subject. I consider the role that embodiment and intersubjectivity play in this process. The issues raised are discussed within a psychoanalytic theory of mind with implications for a comprehensive theoretical and empirical psychology.

Defending the Epistemic Over the Systemic Account of Unconscious Processes

Different effects arise as a result of accessing material that has been

rendered unconscious for different reasons. Preconscious material is unconscious only as a result of inattention (e.g., you are not currently attending to your telephone number). There is no anxiety attendant on accessing this material. Motivational conflicts or affectively laden experiences (e.g., memories of past actions or impulses which conflict with current convictions) are candidate cases for material that is unconscious in a more dynamic sense. It is this latter sense of dynamically unconscious material that is my focus.

If we accept that not being epistemically available to awareness is a feature of any material that is unconscious, then important questions concern the different processes involved in making the material unavailable, and different effects consequent on momentary access to it. These processes concern motivational and affective contingencies which are implicated in the process of material becoming or remaining unconscious, but are additional to the ontological status of unconscious mental processes. They are contingencies that arise from our cultural experiences and socialization history. Thus a dichotomous picture of a cognitive unconscious and a dynamic unconscious gives way to concern with processes and effects differentially instantiated and to differing degrees. Particular *contents* are not automatically relegated to one system or another, their status depends on the affective charge, or motivational conflict involved. For example, when a desired but forbidden person asks for your phone number, that innocent fact may become dynamically unconscious.

The Prehistory of the "New" Cognitive Unconscious

Although an epistemic view of unconscious processes was part of Freud's thinking from the very start, he increasingly favoured a "systemic" view of the unconscious which assumes essential, intrinsic differences between conscious and unconscious mental processes. The observation of a number of peculiar characteristics (exemption from mutual contradiction, timelessness, replacement of external reality with thought reality) led Freud (1915/1984) to consider them as characteristics of a separate system. But the peculiarities of mechanism, characteristics and contents ascribed by Freud only to the system unconscious have been shown to be "on the contrary, just as familiar in conscious mentality" (Petocz, 1999, p. 155).¹

Listing the attributes of the system unconscious leads Epstein (1994) to suggest that such a system might be able to generate dreams and psychotic aberrations, but makes little sense from an evolutionary perspective.² He poses the puzzle as to how a theory of the unconscious with such a critical flaw could have endured for so long. Epstein then outlines a "new unconscious, sometimes referred to as the *cognitive unconscious*" (1994, p. 710, emphasis in original). This

is "a fundamentally adaptive system that automatically, effortlessly and intuitively organizes experience and directs behaviour" (p. 710). This view he contrasts with the one he ascribes to Freud:

Unlike the thinking of Freud, who assumed that all information (other than that acquired during a preverbal period) would be conscious in the absence of repression, the new concept holds that most information processing occurs automatically and effortlessly outside of awareness because that is its natural mode of operation, a mode that is far more efficient than conscious, deliberative thinking. (1994, p. 710)

Invoking but not quoting Freud, Epstein says, "all information would be conscious bar repression" (p. 710). In contrast, I argue that one could read Freud as saying that everything would be (epistemically) unconscious were it not for the further occurrence of conscious awareness. Everything conscious has an unconscious preliminary stage ("...every mental process...exists to begin with in an unconscious stage or phase": Freud, 1916-17/1976, p. 336). What is unconscious may remain at that stage and nevertheless claim to be regarded as having the full causal role of a psychical process. Freud notes, "every psychical act begins as an unconscious one, and it may either remain so, or go on developing into consciousness, according as it meets with resistance or not" (1916-17/1976, p. 55). This underpins his famous commitment to a concept of mind wider than that of consciousness.

By attributing automatic information processing only to the new conception of the unconscious, Epstein (1994) robs Freud of that very (epistemic) conception of the unconscious that is a major part of his original writings.³ Epstein's (1994) cognitive-experiential self-theory aims to reconceptualize the cognitive unconscious "in a way that could account for the behaviour of full-blooded, emotionally driven and conflicted people" (1994, p. 710). He distinguishes between the "mode of the experiential system which is assumed to be intimately associated with affect" and "processing in the mode of the rational system which is assumed to be relatively affect free" (p. 711). That the two modes do not entail differences in kind, is captured in the phrase "relatively affect free".

Beyond Hot Cognition: Motivation and Affect

The term cognitive unconscious is overly restrictive in so far as it seems to exclude affective and motivational influences. These processes are central to fleshing out how material might become dynamically unconscious, since this entails (among other things) that a subject is motivated not to know something.

But these processes might also be the real life reasons for the fleeting or masked experience of stimuli that the tachistoscope produces in the cognitive unconscious experimental paradigm.

One cannot get round the issue of motivation merely by talking about "hot cognition". One cannot say with Westen (1992), that wishes are mismatches between desired and cognized states of affairs, since they are desires *to get rid of* the mismatch. To focus on the discrepancy (the cognitive representation), says Baumeister (1992), is to lose the essence of motivation. We are not just "knowers" we are "wanters" (Baumeister, 1992; Maze, 1983). Affective processes and motivation are central to accounts of unconscious processes (Westen, 1998).

From a Freudian perspective, all knowing is motivated knowing; what is salient, what is taken for granted depends not merely on our cognitive mental apparel, it hinges on motives, urges, affects and drives. Memories are repressed not because of the events they concern, but because of the unacceptability of the impulses expressed in those events (Wollheim, 1971). That material can become in some sense dynamically unconscious is central to psychoanalysis. But not all evidence supporting the causal effects of mental events of which we know nothing supports a *motivated* forgetting, or forgetting due to anxiety. Concern with material that is dynamically unconscious broadens the scope of inquiry to include reasons why material has become epistemically unavailable. These issues do not hinge on the epistemic relations alone. Westen (1998) notes that cognitive scientists may be wary of extending the concept of unconscious processes to affect and motivation, may balk at the concept of defense which entails exploring whether "affective considerations can bias the way thought is assembled outside of awareness" (p. 336). Evidence already supports more than a completely pared back cognitive notion of unconscious processes. We need a framework to understand what forms of unconscious processes experimental evidence supports, before we can point to research gaps that implicating affective and motivational processes might entail.

Beyond the Simple and Irrational: Unconscious Complexity, Feelings and Acquired Constructs

Experimental support for the existence of unconscious processing has been reviewed elsewhere (Epstein, 1994; Westen, 1998). Support is not restricted to cognitive effects such as priming, masking and implicit memory. Affective and motivational themes are increasingly present in experimental work on unconscious processes. There is evidence for unconscious influences on our feelings and attitudes towards others (Lewicki, 1985). Subliminal exposure to ghastly pictures led subjects to rate another's personality portrait more negatively. This has

implications for stereotyping in that it is based on affective conditioning that is unconscious and automatic and therefore highly resistant to change. While Woody and Phillips (1995) suggest that the dynamic unconscious must not be confused with "the relatively simple and low-level processing characteristic of the cognitive unconscious" (p. 127), Bargh (1997) contends all is not simple and irrational just because it is unconscious. Rather he contends that "the history of a person's learning in a given situation is embodied in habitual and automatic motives" (cited in Westen, 1998, p. 343). Unique personal history is implicated since acquired constructs can function in a highly automatic way. Less attention is required to process self-relevant information than information irrelevant to the self, suggesting such chronically accessible constructs have some qualities of automatic cognitive processes – they are unintentional, efficient, lacking in control and lacking in awareness (Bargh, 1992). There is evidence of complexity; effects generalize to associatively connected ideas. Susan Andersen (1992) demonstrated that subliminal activation spreads to related thoughts with measurable consequences for perception and judgement. Westen (1998, p. 339) notes that the meta-analysis of over one hundred studies supports the existence of subliminal psychodynamic activation effects. Subliminal messages addressing material likely to evoke inner conflict or defensive reactions have more effect than neutral messages on subsequent information processing.

Experimental paradigms addressing unconscious processes use the most fleeting of stimuli to tease apart the subjective threshold of detection from the objective. Like the clinical use of free association they show that just because you think you are guessing, doesn't mean you are. One intriguing possibility is that repression in ordinary life may mimic the laboratory: affective or motivational processes may render certain cognitions so fleeting as to preclude conscious cognitive awareness. Exploring the different causal profiles for experience on which we can report, and for embodied experience upon which we may act, may not merely mean bringing affect and motivation into the laboratory. We may also wish to explore ecological versions of the laboratory parameters of transience and masking.

Advantages of this Framework

Putting dynamically unconscious phenomena in this framework renders them more plausible ontologically and empirically than in the systemic account of unconscious processes. Further, this framework is in conformity with evidence in according unconscious processes causal efficacy. It still allows a case to be made for repression and defense, separate from the issue of the ontological status of unconscious material.

There is also much to lose in abandoning any notion of the causal efficacy of unconscious processes in a uniquely hermeneutical treatment of the concept such as that promoted by Woody and Phillips (1995). They assert, "the psychodynamic unconscious is an artefact of the processes of interpretation and self-interpretation whereby human beings knit their experiences together into networks of meaning" (p. 127). They suggest that "the dynamics of meaning-relations revealed in psychotherapy must not be confused with . . . the causal relations to be sought in neurophysiology" (p. 127). While such networks of meaning are of undoubted significance, meanings and causes are indivisible features of Freud's whole endeavour: namely that causal, bodily processes are involved in the production of meanings. The relation of the signifier to the signified is a hermeneutic consideration. Psychoanalysis concerns more than this in so far as it addresses motivated meanings: signifier, signified and motivated knowing subject. Some oppose an identity theory of mind without realizing how much hinges on it. An identity thesis suggests that the question is not how the gap between body and mind is overcome, but what are the consequences of recognizing that there is no gap. That there is no gap is central to any psychosomatic nuance to understanding illness, and to any theory that allows conversion symptoms, that is the bodily expression of psychic conflicts. How can we recognize the mental in something so physical as (say) vomiting, to use Lear's (1990) example? Depending on one's theoretical commitments this bodily expression of unconscious processes may extend to the sedimented form of a symptom. Not all identity theories of mind assume that there can be psychosomatic effects and conversion symptoms (since these positions entail many more assumptions), but an identity thesis does underpin such phenomena. You cannot give up on the causal efficacy of unconscious processes if you want all this, though one's level of causal description may differ from that of neuropsychology.

Catching Ourselves Unawares: Detecting Unconscious Processes

Some of Freud's most famous clinically vital distinctions (such as remembering, repeating and working through) hinge on his supposition that information can causally influence our actions without reaching the level of conscious awareness. It is now widely accepted (even outside psychoanalysis) that introspection is not incorrigible. We sometimes act upon beliefs which escape our capacities for introspection and self report (Tversky and Kahneman, 1974). We have a capacity for property discrimination where our capacity for articulation runs out. It seems there is a motoric primacy of response in that we can act on the basis of information or stimuli that we cannot speak about. As Epstein (1994) notes, Pavlov spoke about a primary and a secondary signalling system; non-

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verbal conditioning and verbally mediated processes respectively, and the distinction between procedural and declarative knowledge is well known. Our conscious awareness may occur contemporarily at a level that is nonetheless inaccessible to linguistic expression (Epstein's [1994] "experiential awareness"). Some therapists suggest that those who attempt to modify people's cognitive schemas may well be leaving this level untouched.

Conscious Awareness: The Limits of Language and the Periphery of the Body

These points suggest there are drawbacks in placing too much emphasis on linguistic accessibility as the dividing line of conscious/unconscious, since this is not the only means by which we can become consciously aware. Through our bodily awareness, proprioception and kinaesthesia, we can apprehend that we are about to act upon an impulse, and only at this moment become aware that we have the impulse. It might literally be the motor program already starting to run off which makes us aware of an impulse to act (Maze, 1983). This may conflict with other urges or moral convictions, resulting in a touch or a blow being arrested mid-air. We do not need an autocerebroscope to become consciously aware, since thoughts, drives and affects have bodily effects.

The essence of consciousness is that perceiving or remembering a state of affairs is taken as object of a second act of awareness. Nothing is added to the first moment of knowing, but something is added to us as system. Consciousness can occur via many processes, and if the usual brain links are gone, we use the periphery of our body to work out what (for instance) the other hemisphere has been visually exposed to. But we cannot assume that we do not use as an additional source of information the peripheral stimulation of our body even if brain links are there. In this non-visual way we may consciously observe our own unconscious mentality. We can reflect on a state of affairs (as it is happening, or in the past), or we can reflect on we who are the knowers (self-reflection) and tease out the relevant attributes (we were wiser then, or happier, ignorant and wild).

Intersubjectivity and the Permeable Subject

If we sometimes act upon and give bodily and facial expression to beliefs and affects of which we are not consciously aware, others may pick up on them. Others may, at times, have privileged access to our unconscious mental states. Others may, at times, perceive more clearly than we do ourselves when we are motivated by urges or influenced by facts outside of our own awareness. This is a

radical form of intersubjectivity.

There is a sense in which "your" unconscious is "in you-out-there". Unconscious processes are not fully contained or housed by a subject. At the level of unconscious processes, there can be a blurring of the boundaries of self and other, something that is implicated in affective contagion and other forms of collective effervescence. It may occur as pressure placed upon another to act in ways that confirm our expectations, or fulfil earlier patterns of interaction of affective engagement. The notion of projective identification describes a vanishing point as to where one person ends and another begins. It is the limit case of intersubjectivity and identity, and is not accepted by all clinicians of a dynamic persuasion. It entails one person's attempts to manipulate another into playing a part in their fantasy (Bion, 1959, cited in Ogden, 1979, p. 365). The fantasy may involve the repetition of old relationship patterns, repetition which may be avoided if the recipient recognizes the pressure to act a part, sees what the requirements for doing that would be, but does not fulfil the fantasy. This entails neither merely unconscious to unconscious communication in the first instance, nor merely the mirroring back of unconscious processes, but their reception and transformation. Many see this process as a powerful pathway for psychological change (Ogden, 1979).

Suggesting that unconscious to unconscious communication can occur is not to suggest that others have privileged or complete access to every aspect of our mental experience. Some contemporary philosophers of mind suggest that conscious awareness is accompanied by phenomenal experience; a non-discursive consciousness, that is inevitably private, available to no one but oneself. From this perspective these *qualia*, the "what it is like to" experience (say) the juiciness of a particular peach in a unique state of thirst for you on just such a morning, are not able to be shared. This plausible position forms a limit case to the scope of empathy.⁴ It does not mean that the mental is private.

What Does Consciousness Add?

The acceptance of unconscious perception and information processing within the last two decades in mainstream psychological research and the demonstrated efficiency of such processes leaves us wondering why we would ever need anything else? What does consciousness add?

In his earliest writings, Freud asks, in what does consciousness consist? "But what part is there left to be played in our scheme by consciousness, which was once so omnipotent and hid all else from view?" (Freud, 1900/1976, p. 776). He wonders whether he is constrained to accept the position put forward by the philosophers of his day that consciousness is an acausal epiphenomenon. No, he

says, we are rescued from this embarrassing position. But rescued by what? I'm embarrassed to say, by an analogy:

Those philosophers who have become aware that rational and highly complex thought-structures are possible without consciousness playing any part in them have found difficulty in assigning any function to consciousness; it has seemed to them that it can be no more than a superfluous reflected picture of the completed psychical process. We, on the other hand, are rescued from this embarrassment by an analogy between our Conscious system and the perceptual systems.
(Freud, 1900/1976, p. 777)

The psychical apparatus, itself turned towards the external world, is in itself the external world in its relation to the "sense-organ of consciousness". Consciousness is likened to a sense organ that perceives psychic facts. For Freud, in the first instance the direction of attention automatically occurs with the activation of sensory pathways, directed to the incoming spread of excitation. The real control comes from conscious awareness however, where there is a more discriminating regulation of attention. In his view, consciousness enables us "to work over even what is associated with the release of unpleasure" (1900/1976, p. 778). Consciousness thus perfects the efficiency of the apparatus permitting a new process of regulation, which for Freud constitutes "the superiority of men over animals" (1900/1976, p. 778). If we act with awareness, we can weigh our options differently. We can weigh up our urges, needs and knowledge, we can balance what we want now with what the present and future contingencies are likely to be. That is no guarantee whatsoever that we will act like good citizens, just that a different process will underlie the action.

Freud's historical position thus offers satisfactory perspectives on certain features of consciousness, which, Paul Churchland (1998) has recently argued, are consciousness' defining features. It involves directable attention and does not require new sensory input, affords us some control in terms of inhibition, and reflection. This might underpin the flexible intelligent behaviour philosophers characterize as deriving from conscious awareness (Graham, 1998). For philosophy and cognitive science what matters is the ontological status of conscious processes, whether they have causal efficacy and consequences of such processes for one's metaphysical commitments in a theory of mind. The emphasis is different if one takes a more psychotherapeutic perspective on consciousness.

Consciousness Undoes Automaticity

That we can efficiently process information without awareness is well established. But the very efficiency of those automatic processes might pose a problem at another level. For thoughts, emotions and experiences of the past merely to be running off within us is not sufficient for consciousness. Melanie Greenberg (1995) suggests in her review article on Post-traumatic Stress Disorder that rumination can itself become the problem if no fresh perspective is gained. Rumination, an unbidden reliving of trauma, rather than bringing relief, may play a role in moving a person from having an acute stress reaction to Post-traumatic Stress Disorder. Intersubjectivity may not be just a mode of access to unconscious processes, but also a key mode for transformation.

Automatic processing in terms of socially acquired constructs or schemata may narrow our perception of reality over the life span, making it more selective and more culturally congruent. While the encounter with reality is likely to be influenced by what is personally and culturally salient, what is schematized does not exhaust what is perceptible. In the case of perception it is vital for an organism to be able to accept data contradicting its most centrally held beliefs. If perception is an entirely top-down process, then the perception of novelty is impossible (Griffiths, 1997, p. 95). To argue that we are selective in our perception of reality is not also to argue that therefore we construct reality. One can retain the individual uniqueness of phenomenological experience and the relativity of cultural and subcultural perspectives that come with acknowledging that when someone perceives or remembers it is always from a particular vantage point without departing from a realist ontology.

What gets laid down in memory may be schematized, and increasingly so with passage of time (as we develop personal narratives, and self-defining memories). For example, writing an autobiography in no way guarantees fresh insights or a transformed understanding of the past. Bruner (1993) likens this special form of self-recollection to a form of "legal pleading", noting that "both depend on the achievement of a convincing reality" (p. 46). Discussing autobiography, Phillips (1994) says that there is no personal history without psychoanalysis, only its concealment. He suggests we should ask of an autobiography, "who is its implied, ideal reader and what is the catastrophic reading it is trying to avert" (p. 71).

Our self-constructs may be or become less than optimal, but because the processing occurs at an unconscious level, we do not notice the selectivity they result in, and cannot change the constructs or schemata, or assess their optimality. This outcome is possible whether or not one accepts evidence for the existence of material that is rendered unconscious for reasons of psychic defense. If this latter point is accepted, different patterns of selectivity may occur depending on the

specific material causing anxiety, or resisting the full acknowledgment of personal meaning and significance via various defenses. Most therapeutic interventions rely on the unhinging of habits (of thought, action or emotional relationship) whether or not they explicitly suggest that one needs to become conscious of those habits or of the environmental stimuli that maintain them, or the way they preclude possible disconfirming evidence. Narrative therapists, such as those inspired by the work of Michael White (1997) have an ear for the unusual outcome that disconfirms the main narrative. They listen for a counterplot, for alternative narratives that draw in as central, capacities disregarded by the dominant narrative (which may have become disabling). The habitual becomes open to the possible.

Available cultural discourses also influence how we position ourselves in the present and in reflection. This selectivity regarding individual memory is true also of social memory. What is recorded in archives and public records is likely to concern verbal, literate, socially visible groups. Attwood's (1989) case study of the historical disenfranchisement of an Aboriginal woman is possible only because she had such a civic presence via her letters. The past is a scarce resource. What remains is not merely indicative of what was, but indicative of what has been retained and what has been allowed to perish. History (personal or social) entails what can be said of what was from where we are now.

As conscious awareness permits us to explore the origins and optimality of unconscious constructs (categories, schemas, and scripts) for present life placement, a critical perspective plays a comparable role in the history of a science. Both render "visible" processes, concepts and assumptions that have structured exploration of the world while escaping critical theoretical appraisal. The putative systemic difference between a dynamic unconscious and a cognitive unconscious is just such an assumption that has structured contemporary debate in unhelpful ways. I argue that viewing a dynamic unconscious and a cognitive unconscious as fundamentally different kinds of unconscious process rests on an illusory ontological distinction. Recognizing this, or even entertaining it as a possibility opens up theoretical and research avenues.

Notes

- 1 For a convincing series of arguments showing that attributes supposedly unique to the system unconscious are "demonstrably not distinctive of unconscious processes", see Petocz (1999, pp. 154-156)
- 2 For a contrary argument as to the evolutionary advantageousness of such a system see Edelman (1992, p. 145)

- 3 Petocz (1999) gives an excellent account of the complexity of Freud's shifting and at times confused positions, and a rigorous theoretical synthesis showing the pitfalls of a systemic view of unconscious processes and the aligned structural view of repression
- 4 I do not see quale as epiphenomenal, nor a threat to materialist conceptions of mind. Quale have behavioural influence in that the sweetness of the peach may determine whether I buy more from the same orchard or change my supplier. Further, they may have behavioural influence by preserving phenomenal attributes of the source of information. I may pause before acting on something seen in the evening (because I doubt the accuracy of visual information perceived under conditions of scotopic adaptation), but not before acting on auditory information gained at the same time

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