

THE UNCONSCIOUS

In one of his *Introductory Lectures*, Freud told the following story:

I was once the guest of a young married couple and heard the young woman laughingly describe her latest experience. The day after her return from her honeymoon she had gone shopping with her unmarried younger sister while her husband went to his business. Suddenly she noticed a gentleman on the other side of the street, and nudging her sister had cried: "Look, there goes Herr L." She had forgotten that this gentleman had been her husband for some weeks. I shuddered as I heard the story, but I did not dare to draw the inference. The little incident only occurred to my mind some years later when the marriage had come to a most unhappy end.

The inference Freud did not dare draw is clear: Although she may not have been consciously aware of it, the bride "knew" from the beginning that this was not a marriage she wanted to be in.

Freud did not discover the unconscious. The existence and importance of unconscious mental life had been considered by others before him and was being explored by at least one of his contemporaries. Poets and playwrights had long known of it, of course. What Freud did was add greatly to our knowledge of the contents and workings of unconscious processes and show how that knowledge could greatly increase the power both of therapists to help their clients and of all of us to understand the nature of our own psychic life and that of others.

The central statements of Freud's theory of the unconscious are not complicated: We don't know why we feel what we feel; we don't know why we fear what we fear; we don't know why we think what we think; and above all, we don't know why we do what we do. What we feel, fear, think, and do is much more complicated and much more interesting than it may at first appear.

We don't know why we feel what we feel.

My adult client, Max, gets furious at his mother for incidents which, when he describes them, don't seem to me to remotely justify such intense reaction. It seems clear to me that something else must have triggered such anger.

We don't know why we fear what we fear.

Marty reports that he takes every opportunity to avoid answering the telephone. When it becomes necessary to answer the phone he experiences typical symptoms of anxiety: His heart pounds, he sweats, his breathing becomes difficult. He has no idea why telephoning terrifies him.

We don't know why we think what we think.

Rebecca thinks she is unlovable. It makes no difference that people tell her they love her. She doesn't believe them and remains convinced she is unlovable.

We don't know why we do what we do.

George, who is a student, spends a weekend playing video games and flunks an important exam, one on which he could have done well with some effort. He reports that he got little pleasure from the games and actually is very interested in the course material he was supposed to study.

In one of his lectures Freud introduced the concept of the unconscious by describing a patient who felt irresistibly compelled to hurry into a nearby room, stand by a certain table, and summon the parlor maid. She would then dismiss the maid but would soon feel compelled to

repeat the sequence. The meaning of the ritual was a complete mystery to her and very distressing. Then one day she spontaneously understood it.

She was separated from her husband, with whom she had lived only briefly. On her wedding night her husband had been impotent. Through the course of the night he had repeatedly hurried from his room into hers, attempted intercourse, and failed. The next morning he had poured red ink on the bed so that the maid would believe his bride had been deflowered. However, he hurriedly positioned the spot of ink in such a way that his stratagem was defeated.

Since the separation this woman had lived celibate and alone her life crippled by obsessive rituals, thinking of her husband with exaggerated respect and admiration. She told Freud there was a stain on the cloth covering the table by which she stood when summoning the maid. She stood in such a way as to be sure the maid would see the stain.

The woman had unconsciously designed the ritual to save her husband from humiliation by symbolically showing the maid the hymenal spot on the sheet. When Freud first questioned her she had absolutely no idea of the meaning of the ritual. That is, it was unconscious.

With rare exception, psychologists before Freud thought of mental life and consciousness as synonymous. The idea of unconscious mental life seemed a contradiction in terms. Freud realized there was no way to explain the thoughts and actions of his patients without radically altering that view of the mind as a whole.

He saw that consciousness was only a small part of mental life, and conceived an image to describe the mind. He portrayed the unconscious as a large entrance hall filled with mental images, all trying to get into a small drawing room into which the entrance hall opens. In that drawing room resides consciousness, with whom the impulses are hoping for an audience. In the doorway between the entrance hall and the drawing room stands a watchman, whose job is examine each impulse seeking admission and decide if that impulse is

acceptable. If it is not, the watchman turns it away, and it must remain in the entrance hall of unconsciousness. If an unacceptable impulse gets just past the threshold, the watchman will evict it and push it back into the entrance hall. The impulses that are turned back in this fashion are *repressed*. Once an impulse has gained admission to the drawing room, it still is not conscious until it has caught the eye of consciousness. Such impulses, those in the drawing room but not yet seen by consciousness, are *preconscious*; this drawing room is the system of the preconscious. This watchman who ejects, that is represses, unacceptable impulses is the same watchman who turns up as *resistance* when the analyst sets out to lift the repression for the liberation of the patient.

The watchman might decide to refuse to admit an impulse or thought into the drawing room because if that impulse were to catch the eye of consciousness it would produce an unwelcome emotion: fear, guilt, or shame. We will examine those grounds for censorship in some detail in Chapter 6. For now it is enough to note that it is the job of the watchman-censor to apply those criteria as he screens applicants for admission to the drawing room.

Who are the inhabitants of the entrance hall, those thoughts, wishes, and impulses that make up unconscious mental life? The main attribute of the unconscious is, of course, that it is unconscious. For the purposes of this discussion, let's define an unconscious mental event as that to which one doesn't have verbal access, at least without unusual measures. If you ask me why I wasted the weekend joylessly, I really couldn't tell you. Nor could I tell you why I'm afraid of harmless mice. By applying special association techniques or perhaps taking sodium pentothal I might find out, but just sitting here trying to figure it out, I can't. Were these thoughts to become conscious they would cause a painful feeling. Therefore they are being forcibly kept in the entrance hall by the watchman.

The impulses and thoughts in the drawing room upon which the eye of consciousness has not alighted constitute the preconscious. Freud

defined this as a mental event, not presently conscious, but capable of being called to consciousness at will. It is not likely that at this moment you are thinking of your mother's maiden name, but should I ask you what it is, you could probably call it up and report it. Until you called it up it was preconscious. Some unconscious things are more deeply buried than others. The watchman has instructions to be more stringent about rejecting some impulses than others. For example, I seem to have trouble remembering the name of a certain orchestra conductor. Right now, I couldn't tell you what it is. But if I work at it, perhaps by going through the alphabet until I reach the first letter of his name, I can almost always recover it. Right now that information is unconscious, but not very. On the other hand, I'm certain that there are memories and feelings, probably very old ones, buried so deeply and so well guarded that it is unlikely I will ever access them. Many of our motives are somewhere in between. They are possible to access, but not easy.

Freud recognized that many ideas are simply forgotten and not repressed at all. Forgotten ideas drift away and are gone. Ideas repressed into the unconscious remain a part of the person's mental life. Therapists who insist that *everything* is motivated are notorious for getting into fruitless arguments with their clients. It is not always easy or productive to attempt to distinguish between that which is repressed and that which is simply forgotten.

Freud drew a sharp line between preconscious and unconscious. If something could be readily accessed it was simply preconscious; if not it was unconscious. In practice, however, it often seems difficult to make that clear distinction between those categories. I think the most workable model is that of a continuum of ideas from conscious to deeply buried. "Preconscious" would refer to those ideas just below consciousness on the continuum.

Another important feature of unconscious mental events is that, whereas conscious events obey the laws of "secondary process," much, although not all, of the unconscious is governed by the laws of what

Freud called "primary process." Secondary process describes the familiar world of logic. Events occur in an orderly sequence. What's past is past and what's future has not yet come. This is the world of cause and effect. If I study I get good grades; if I am irritable with a friend he is likely to be irritated. In this world fantasy and action are different things with different consequences. If I daydream instead of cleaning the room, I am aware it will not actually get clean. If I wish something bad to happen to someone, I don't think it's my fault if, by coincidence, something does.

Unlike secondary process, primary process operates without regard for *reality*. This implies a strange kind of logic, not the logic we know in the realm of secondary process. In this realm there is no concept of mutual contradiction or mutual exclusion. I might want to kill my father and have him take me to the movies tomorrow. I expect you to love me after I've insulted you. The laws of reality and logic being so loose, strange associations can exist: An idea can stand for a similar one; one idea can be displaced onto a totally different one; one idea can stand for a whole group of ideas.

My fear of my father can become fear of a horse biting me. This is a typical association chain in the realm of primary process: I love and fear my father. I am conscious of the love but the fear is unconscious. I am afraid he will hurt me physically to punish me for bad thoughts. A horse is a large, intimidating figure like my father. I have seen the horse's dangerous teeth. I'm not consciously afraid of my father but rather of the horse. That has advantages: Horses are easier to avoid than my father.

My anger at a parent can become a radical political position. My parents use their authority to restrict me. The government is also an authority. I will direct my rebelliousness at the government. My longing for my comforting mother can become a fondness for a class of foods. (It is no accident that foods such as mashed potatoes and warm custard are called "comfort foods.")

Primary process is timeless. It recognizes no past and no future. If something was dangerous 20 years ago, it is still dangerous. If I am suffering now, I will always suffer. If, long ago, I was afraid my parents would punish me for bad thoughts or bad acts, the fear of that punishment remains in full force even after my parents are long dead. One of the goals of psychodynamic therapy is to take the important issues out of the realm of primary process and into the realm of secondary process. If I begin therapy burdened by this fear, my therapist and I will be pleased if I learn (deeply) that there is no longer anything to fear, that there is no authority wanting to punish me.

In the realm of primary process there is no distinction between fantasy and reality, between wish and action. If I want my father dead I might be as guilty as if I had killed him. Should he actually die from some totally unrelated cause, I am convinced I killed him, and the guilt is severe. Similarly, should I long for a pleasure I believe is bad, I might be as guilty as if I had actually experienced it. Freud thought that the guilt over an unconscious wish could be stronger and more destructive than the guilt over an actual act. Ironically, for most of us, although the guilt may be as great, the fantasy *pleasure* is not as satisfying as it would have been in reality.

Perhaps most important, primary process operates on the "pleasure principle." The pleasure principle requires *pleasure! now!* It is the opposite of the "reality principle" on which secondary process operates. Freud thought that when infants experience a need, they imagine the food or the event or the person that will meet that need. Soon they learn the inadequacy of this way of getting needs met and discover that they must attend to, and learn the rules of, the external world, of *reality*. Imagining milk does not reduce the hunger. Imagining mother's presence does not provide enough comfort. Babies learn the necessity of manipulating the real world to satisfy their wants. This is the beginning of the reality principle.

As the child grows, this principle becomes increasingly sophisticated. Under its sway children learn the advantages

(sometimes the *necessity*) of *delaying gratification*. Most second graders, if asked whether they want a small candy bar now or a large one tomorrow, choose the small one now. They are operating under the influence of the pleasure principle: pleasure *now* and no delay! Many third graders, on the other hand, will choose to wait for the large candy bar. Between the ages of seven and eight children learn the advantage of delaying gratification.

As the reality principle develops, children learn to estimate consequences. I don't feel like doing homework, but I choose not to incur the teacher's displeasure and possible punishment. As we will see in the pages ahead, one of the most powerful inhibitors of pleasure-seeking behavior is fear of being punished by our conscience: fear of guilt. There is often nothing to stop me from hurting a powerless person except my awareness of the severe pain my conscience would inflict upon me. Freud thought that this is what prevents civilized life from becoming even more destructive and dangerous than it presently is.

As we grow, we apply the reality principle to more and more sophisticated issues. A scientist rejects a research project that she could finish relatively quickly and easily, choosing instead a more challenging one. Athletes, dancers, and singers put themselves through years of grueling practice to meet a standard of excellence.

Freud made an interesting observation about the sexual impulses in relation to the pleasure and reality principles. Because the sex drive, unlike some others, is capable of solitary satisfaction, satisfaction that doesn't require reality testing, delay of gratification, or concern for consequences, in some people it comes less under the sway of the reality principle than do other drives and thus is apt to cause the person a great deal of pain and trouble. That trouble can take many forms. In some it can lead to never giving up masturbation as the main method of satisfaction; in others it can lead to disastrous sexual adventures, when a moment's thought would have made the consequences apparent. Perhaps that is why it has proven so hard to

stem the spread of sexually transmitted diseases. Perhaps this concept could be broadened to include other drives, including the hunger drive, to throw some light on the prevalence and tenacity of eating disorders.

The pleasure principle is *pleasure! now!* and the reality principle is *safer pleasure later, even if it's less pleasure*. Were it not for the development of the reality principle we would continuously be in serious trouble. We would have no capacity to delay gratification, estimate consequences, or assess reality.

There is always a tug of war between the pleasure principle and the reality principle. It is remarkable that Robert Louis Stevenson wrote *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* without knowing Freud's work. It is a gripping story of the pleasure principle and the reality principle. Dr. Jekyll, feeling the constraints of civilized life, devises a potion that will allow him to act out the impulses of the pleasure principle, impulses that exist in the unconscious of us all. Dr. Jekyll is as sweet and gentle a man as can be found in London society. When his unconscious impulses are allowed to see the light of day, we learn that they are concerned only with instant gratification. They recognize no delay and, disastrously, they recognize no concern for the well-being of others. When Dr. Jekyll takes the potion he becomes Mr. Hyde, a cruel, totally selfish monster, his sexual and aggressive impulses unrestrained.

Presented in this way, the world of primary process sounds horrible and, as in Mr. Hyde, if unrestrained it can be disastrous. However, there is another, equally important, side to the picture. The realm of primary process contains the raw material for our poetry, our creativity, and our playfulness. A world of pure secondary process would be a sterile world indeed. Freud taught that the artist is one who can explore the realm of primary process and then make an artistic unity out of what is found there. He might have added that the same applies to the passionate lover and the imaginative companion.

In Freud's original conception, the mind was composed of three systems: the *unconscious*, the *preconscious*, and the *perceptual-conscious*. We have already met that model in the picture of the

drawing room, the entrance hall, and the watchman. The unconscious system (the entrance hall) was the realm of primary process and the pleasure principle, and the conscious system (the drawing room) was the seat of secondary process and the reality principle. It eventually became clear to Freud that although this was a good way to think of repression and the relationship of consciousness to the unconscious, a complete theory of the mind required a different model. He had always seen the human mind as being in persistent, unremitting conflict, and it seemed to him that his clinical data could be handled best by a picture of the mind divided not into the original three systems but into three agencies, often struggling with each other. In his final model one of those agencies operated under the laws of primary process and the pleasure principle, and another under the laws of secondary process and the reality principle. In his final picture the three agencies in the mind are the *id*, the *ego*, and the *superego*.

The id is the repository of the instinctual drives, sexual and aggressive. It is totally unconscious and totally unsocialized. It always operates on the pleasure principle, demanding satisfaction of the drives completely and without delay. It does not care for consequences, reason, or good sense, nor does it care about the well-being of others. The id is what Dr. Jekyll's potion released, and the resulting Mr. Hyde is a chilling picture of the id run wild. As well as operating on the pleasure principle, the id follows the laws of primary process, with no sense of time or mutual exclusion.

The superego is our conscience. It represents our having taken into our own mind the standards and prohibitions of our parents and of society. Originally we feared losing the love and protection of our parents if we gave way to the impulses of the id. Once we have taken those standards and prohibitions into ourselves, we have to be aware of a new set of consequences: the attack on us by the superego, which is to say, *guilt*. Part of the superego is conscious; we know a lot about what our conscience permits and forbids. However, a large part of it is

unconscious, giving rise to one of our most difficult and destructive problems: unconscious guilt.

The ego is the executive function. It is given the thankless task of mediating among the id, the superego, and the outside world. It operates according to the laws of secondary process and the reality principle. In contradistinction to the id, it is concerned with consequences and does its best to delay gratification to avoid trouble or to gain a greater gratification later. As Freud put it, "The ego stands for reason and good sense while the id stands for untamed passions."

Because the ego manages relations with the outside world, to get its passions gratified the id must enlist the services of the ego. The ego is thus under continual pressure from the id. It must serve two additional masters as well. It must decide whether an action dictated by the id will meet with danger or punishment in the external world and whether it will escape punishment from the superego, that is, the pangs of guilt. It also functions as the watchman in the model of the drawing room and entrance hall, taking on the task of repression and other modes of defense against anxiety. The part of the ego responsible for these defense mechanisms resides in the unconscious.

To Freud, mental health depends in large part on the strength and flexibility of the ego. If it mediates wisely, giving the maximum possible satisfaction to its two internal masters and staying out of trouble with its external one; if it represses no more than is necessary; if it has a great deal of its energy available for joyful and creative living, then the person has escaped the neurosis that so much of civilized life is heir to. I mentioned previously the importance of being able to journey into the underworld of primary process and then creatively organize the resulting discoveries. The Freudians call this process "regression in the service of the ego."

Mr. Hyde presents us with evidence for the necessity of repression. Because the id is a cauldron of impulses, many of them unsocialized, we would be in serious trouble without some optimal amount of repression. We would either be in jail or terribly frustrated because of

the endless need to suppress our wishes. Too little repression is not a good condition. Well, how about too much? It seems likely that this is a problem for every reader of this book, certainly for its author. Freud thought it was the condition of most members of a civilized society. Too much repression involves a number of serious costs:

If repressed impulses and wishes, repressed organizing principles, all live their lives out of reach of my conscious control, out of sight of the ego, I cannot choose how to deal with them. I cannot choose whether or not to act on them. I cannot remind myself that these are relevant to, say, a five-year-old, not an adult. I cannot apply the reality principle and opt for short-term pain. Thus my life is severely circumscribed by organizing principles that no longer serve me, ones I cannot see, let alone change.

Repressed ideas keep their full emotional charge forever. What seemed very dangerous many years ago will seem equally dangerous as long as it is repressed.

Repressed wishes and impulses are under pressure, seeking expression. It is necessary to exert psychic energy to maintain the repression. The ego's job includes organizing, focusing, and implementing one's life, including love, work, play, and learning. That's quite a job; the more energy my ego has at its disposal for those jobs, and the less energy is siphoned off in the service of repression, the better off I am. Otherwise I am like an army with so many of my troops on guard duty that there is no one available to fight.

Repressed ideas attract similar ideas into repression, and thus the area of the repressed grows. Psychologists who study the laws of learning think of this as *stimulus generalization*. If I teach you to press a button when you see a red light, you are very apt to press the button if I show you a very pink light. I learned as a child that it was dangerous to be assertive to my parents, so I repressed assertive impulses. As I grew up and confronted situations in

which it would be adaptive to be assertive, I repressed the impulse because it felt dangerously like the original one. Thus my fear of being assertive progressively spread to more and more situations and became more and more inhibiting.

When Freud first discovered the existence and importance of unconscious mental life, he found himself addressing colleagues who had been taught that all mental life was conscious. He was challenged to provide evidence and typically offered three kinds: dreams, neurotic symptoms, and what he termed *parapraxes* (slips of the tongue and other similar mistakes).

Dreams

Freud called dreams the royal road to the unconscious. He meant that once the interpreter understood the way dreams work, they would reveal the most important unconscious wishes. This he saw not only as evidence for the existence of unconscious mental life but as a major therapeutic tool. Following is an example from *Introductory Lectures*:

*A lady who, though she was still young, had been married for many years had the following dream: She was at the theatre with her husband. One side of the orchestra was completely empty. Her husband told her that Elise L. and her fiance had wanted to go too, but had only been able to get bad seats—three for 62 cents—and of course they could not take those. She thought it would not really have done any harm if they had.*⁴

It is important to remember that Freud thought a dream could be analyzed only with the associations of the dreamer; they would reveal the hidden meaning. Following are a few of the dreamer's associations and the interpretation:

Elise was about the dreamer's age and had just become engaged, although the dreamer herself had been married for 10 years. The dreamer had been in a hurry to reserve seats for a play last week and when she got there found half the orchestra empty; *there had been no need to be in such a hurry.*

The 62 cents: Her sister-in-law had been given a present of \$62.00 and *had been in a great hurry—the silly goose*—to rush off to the jewelers' and buy a piece of jewelry.

Three seats: *The newly engaged Elise was only three months her junior, although the dreamer herself had been a married woman for 10 years.*

The interpretation: It was absurd of me to be in such a hurry to get married. I can see from Elise's example that *I* could have got a husband later, too. And I could have gotten one a hundred times better (the relation between 62 cents and \$62.00).

Neurotic Symptoms

It is difficult to account for self-destructive behavior without positing an unconscious mental life. People adopt behaviors, attitudes, and inhibitions that cripple their lives; they sincerely report that they have no idea why they do such things to themselves. Freud described the following case:

A 19-year-old woman gradually acquires a collection of bedtime rituals that take hours to complete and that drive her and her parents to despair. She would give anything to be able to relinquish them, yet she feels desperately compelled to perform them perfectly. The pillows must be arranged precisely so that they don't touch the headboard, for example. After a great deal of psychoanalytic work Freud and his patient discover that the headboard represents man and the pillow woman. They then discover that the ritual represents

the injunction that mother and father must not touch each other. Indeed, it turns out that before she developed these rituals, as a young child she had insisted that the door between her room and her parents' room must be left open, ostensibly to soothe her anxieties. Actually, she wanted to be able to monitor and thus prevent any sexual activity. The analysis eventually revealed that she had from early childhood been in the grip of an erotic attachment to her father and an angry jealousy of her mother.

Parapraxes

By parapraxes Freud meant slips: of the tongue, of the pen, and various kinds of forgettings and bungled actions. He was fascinated by these phenomena and found them a wonderful window into the workings of the unconscious. Early in his career he collected examples and published them in *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*. He thought parapraxes a clear and convincing way of introducing newcomers to the idea of the unconscious and opened his *Introductory Lectures* with a long description of the phenomenon.

Freud's theory of parapraxes will not surprise a reader who has come this far. A person *intends* something: to say something, to remember something, to do something. But there is a competing intention, one that the watchman attempts to censor. Impulses denied are impulses under pressure, and here the rejected impulse finds a way of getting expressed by causing the slip. Following is one of Freud's examples from *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*:

Freud and a friend are commiserating about anti-Semitism, which the friend finds particularly frustrating. He ends a passionate speech with a well-known line of Virgil's in which the unhappy Dido, having been abandoned by Aeneas, commits to posterity her vengeance. Or rather, he attempts to end his speech that way; he cannot remember the whole

line. The line he attempts to quote is, "*Exoriare aliquis nostris ex ossibus ultor*," which means, "Let someone arise from my bones as an avenger." However, he omits the word, "aliquis" (someone) and can't recover it, although the quote is one he knows well and has kept in memory since his school days. Freud supplies the missing word and induces him to give his associations to the memory lapse. The friend first finds that he wants to divide the word "aliquis" into two parts: "a" and "liquis." His chain of associations then produces: "*Relics, liquefying, fluidity, fluid, St. Januarius and the miracle of his blood.*" Freud inquires and his friend responds, "They keep the blood of St. Januarius in a phial inside a church in Naples, and on a particular holy day it miraculously liquefies. The people attach great importance to this miracle and get very excited if it's delayed, as happened once at a time when the French were occupying the town. So the general in command . . . took the reverend gentleman aside and gave him to understand, with an unmistakable gesture toward the soldiers posted outside, that he *hoped* the miracle would take place very soon. And in fact it did take place." He pauses in embarrassment and Freud needs to urge him to continue. "Well, then, I've suddenly thought of a lady from whom I might easily hear a piece of news that would be very awkward for both of us."

Freud: "That her periods have stopped?"

"How could you guess that?"

"Think of. . . the blood that starts to flow on a particular day, the disturbance when the event fails to take place, the open threat that the miracle must be vouchsafed, or else. . . In fact you've made use of the blood miracle of St. Januarius to manufacture a brilliant allusion to a woman's periods."

I find this a particularly useful example because of its demonstration of the ingenuity of the unconscious. Freud's friend had intended to ask for descendants to avenge him. That was his conscious intention, but the wish for descendants brought up the realization that he was in no

position just now to indulge in that wish. A descendant was the last thing he wanted under these circumstances. The fear of his girlfriend's pregnancy remained unconscious, and from the unconscious that fear expressed itself by blocking out the word "aliquis," just the "someone" he didn't want. Once allowed to play with the associations, the unconscious constructed a creative path that enabled Freud to interpret the slip.

We have seen, in this chapter, something of the nature of the unconscious and how we are motivated by it. In the next two chapters we'll turn to the realm in which those unconscious motivations are most powerful and bewildering, the realm of our sexuality.

James Strachey, Freud's English translator, introduces his translation of Freud's major work on sexuality with these words: "Freud's *Three Essays on Sexuality* stands, there can be no doubt, beside his *Interpretation of Dreams* as his most momentous and original contributions to human knowledge." That seems to me a fair assessment. Freud's studies of infantile sexuality, of psychosexual development, of the role of sex in causing neurosis, and, perhaps above all, of the Oedipus complex, have changed our view of humankind to an unimaginable degree.