

Alfred Adler and the Problem of the Unconscious

LEWIS M. K. LONG, *Cambridge, Mass.*

Introduction

It is difficult to select all the historical influences that contributed to the interpretation of behavior as always consciously motivated, but certainly the rationistic tradition was one of the important elements in propagating this viewpoint. Krech and Crutchfield (11) have suggested that in the historical past man was assumed to be master of his needs and desires and capable of directing them at will. But "where such analysis did not succeed fully in explaining a behavior, the realm of motivation was left and explanations were sought for in other 'mechanisms'—in habit, imitation, suggestion, etc."

It was Freud's genius, of course, that helped to upset this view of the conscious direction of all behavior; "the greatest contribution of Freud was in his effective challenge of this traditional view" (11); and he "gave the concept of the unconscious mind to common sense." (7)

Freud considered "the division of mental life into what is conscious and what is unconscious [as] the fundamental premise on which psycho-analysis is based. . . ." Consciousness is not "the essence of mental life" (9) and "what . . . is left free from one side (consciousness or unconsciousness) receives its motive from the other side." (8) In his last book, Freud went on to say that "the processes in the unconscious or in the id obey different laws from those in the pre-conscious ego . . . the id obeys the inexorable pleasure principle." (10) One must search through a great amount of Freud's writings before becoming sure of what he means by the unconscious processes. Miller, in his book *Unconsciousness*, concludes that these are three in number—"that they are dynamically repressed away from consciousness, the 'organ of perception'; that they can be made available to consciousness only by special techniques such as hypnosis and psycho-analysis; and that they are not under voluntary control." (13)

Miller has rendered a real service by showing the wide range of meanings and definitions given to the word *unconscious*, as used in the past. He lists sixteen different meanings which are to be found in psychological literature. This does not include other words used for

unconsciousness, such as the subconscious, the preconscious, the fore-conscious, the coconscious, and the superconscious. The latter usually add to the confusion already existing about the unconscious.

Hence, even though Freud must be credited with reminding and popularizing the unconscious for us, he is still not of much help in delimiting and specifying its operations in our normal lives. How much of an unconscious life do we have? When does it operate? Is there a constant nucleus that will always control our behavior? Is there no possibility of the conscious aspects of man being able to direct his behavior? These and other questions need an answer.

Adler's Formulation

Adler, very interestingly, proposed some modern formulations for the unconscious: "the unconscious . . . is nothing other than that which we have been unable to formulate in clear concepts" (2), and "the so-called conscious or the ego, is chock full of the unconscious, or as I have called it, the non-understood." (3) This statement is one of the sixteen definitions Miller has found employed by psychologists to mean the unconscious, and today it is the one most frequently used experimentally. (13) This statement does not deny that "not-knowing" is purposive, as Way (15) has pointed out.

Adler also rejected the "dynamic unconscious" because he "denied the separation of the conscious and the unconscious into two sharply divided, even antagonistic, realms of the mind. Adler thought of it as focus and background phenomena . . ." (15), and declared that the "conscious and unconscious move together in the same direction and are not contradictions. . . . There is no line of demarcation between them. It is merely a question of discovering the purpose of their joint movement." (1)

A much more fascinating formulation by Adler, however, was given by him very early in his career. "Human beings may be differentiated into two types: those who know more concerning their unconscious life than the average, and those who know less. . . . The latter concentrate upon a small sphere of activity, whereas individuals of the first type are connected with a many-sided sphere, and have large interests in men, things, events and ideas. . . . They approach life without blinders . . . in an objective manner . . . (the unconscious type) approaches life with a prejudiced attitude and sees only a small part of it." (4)

This definition affords an opportunity for carrying through some empirical work to differentiate between these two types. A group of individuals who have large interests in events and ideas, via operational rules, could be given a battery of projective techniques to try to uncover their unconscious motivations. In turn, a group of subjects with a small sphere of activities could be given a similar battery. According to Adler's hypothesis, the prediction would naturally be that the projective instruments would reveal a large unconscious life in the small-sphere-of-activity people, and a large conscious life in the individuals with many interests. Since these two groups represent end points on a scale, other individuals would probably fall in a continuum somewhere between the extremes. Adler, therefore, envisaged clearly that all of behavior was not unconsciously motivated; and the more normal individual with many interests and activities would be consciously guided most of his life. With modern techniques for tapping the unconscious, Adler's formulation could be easily tested and quantified.

Elsewhere Adler made a clear statement that would coincide with the previous formulation. He said that "the neurotic psyche . . . must have resort to artifices and stratagems. One of these artifices is to transfer the goal into the realm of the unconscious." (5) This means of course, that it is in the neurotic and psychotic individual where we would expect a large component of an unconscious life. In the normal individual we could trust his conscious motivation as being his true motivation.

It is interesting to note that the modern trend of the unconscious and its motivation is swinging in the direction Adler formulated. Allport, who has already been compared with Adler on this topic (12), argues in his latest paper that "in a healthy personality, the great bulk of motivation can be taken at its face value"—that is, the individual with outside interests is consciously directed. Allport believes that the primacy of the blind will concept and the formulation that motives cannot be taken at their face value, have gone too far. Adler would certainly agree.

Concluding Remarks

Today, as one reads all the confusing statements in psychological literature about the unconsciousness, it is refreshing to have an operational definition of this concept. Adler's formulation is a brilliant

thesis, indeed, and it could easily be developed into a hypothesis and then tested. With such a quantification of the concept of the unconscious, a more careful employment of the term would be necessary to avoid its loose use in attempts to "explain away" difficult problems. Moreover, if an objective instrument could be devised which could measure a person's activities and interests, and thereby predict his unconscious, it would prove an invaluable aid in therapy, education, industry, etc.

And for such an undertaking and its results, due credit should be given to Adler's brilliant formulation of forty years ago.

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