

The Myth of "The Unconscious"

WILLARD BEECHER
Brooklyn, New York

The concept of "the Unconscious" should be eliminated from all psychological considerations. Whatever value it may have had as a concept cannot compensate for the harm done by the misunderstandings that have arisen about it. All the phenomena of psychic life can be explained without this misleading conception.

The human race has a strong tendency to "strain at a gnat and swallow a camel." Though we find it difficult to believe in the world that Alice discovered when she stepped through the looking-glass, we solemnly swallow the prodigious myth about "the Unconscious." And whatever scientific meaning it may have had has been lost, for now it means something different to every person.

Man has always sought some kind of personal devil to blame when things went badly or when he did not understand a situation, especially if the mistake was of human origin. But the belief in Satan began to fade when rational, scientific thinking began to develop. When the concept of the Unconscious appeared, however, people seized upon it. They had vanquished the Prince of Darkness, but the Land of Darkness with the same powers took his place. By some, this new force was credited as being more sinister than the old demonology. Both the old and the new had one thing in common: man was not responsible for his evil deeds; his Unconscious was the poltergeist.

Romantic fiction, detective stories, radio, movies, and the ilk moved into this arena with glee. The whole process of rational thought in this area has been reduced to a shambles.

If sanity is to be resored to our thinking about mental processes, we must rid ourselves of the myth of the Unconscious. The term itself may lead one into serious error; people believe that if there is a word for something, it surely must exist. Many now think of the Unconscious as a Thing-in-Itself, with a kind of autonomous life of its own. Countless people think of it as a pit in which things can be "deeply buried" only to arise to plague them at unpredictable times. Many think of it as a diseased area that must be taken out by long analysis if the individual is to escape Purgatory on earth. The majority, in fact,

have come to think of it as a reality rather than as a scientific fiction or postulate.

A scientific fiction or hypothesis is a useful tool created for investigating known phenomena. Physicists, for example, have two conflicting fictions regarding the nature of light: (1), that light travels in waves; (2), that light is emitted in particles or quanta. Both are useful mental fictions in physics; they are ways of thinking about light "As If" light behaved in such ways.

The Unconscious was originally an As If, or hypothesis, and man was regarded as behaving As If he had an Unconscious that worked in opposition to his conscious thought. People soon forgot that the Unconscious was a scientific fiction and began to think of it as a Thing-in-Itself, an entity as real as the continent of Africa, and fully as mysterious.

One cannot turn to a serious discussion of the matter without describing some of the misapprehensions that surround the Unconscious. They seem to fall largely into two categories. In the first, the Unconscious is endowed with omniscience; in the second, it is the modern Beelzebub. Those of a more credulous turn of mind favor the first view, whereas those of a more punitive nature prefer the latter view.

In the first category, the Unconscious sees all and knows all. Everything is remembered and never forgotten. The more extreme proponents of this view believe that this memory goes back past the "birth trauma" into intra-uterine life. Some even claim "racial memory." All manner of fantastic powers are ascribed to the Unconscious such as the ability to know foreign languages not previously heard by the individual, clairvoyance, telepathy, and countless Something-for-Nothing attributes.

Mankind has always sought and dreamed of Something-for-Nothing, and the belief in magic, perpetual motion, bargains, etc., haunts our thoughts by day and our dreams by night. Our chronic wishfulness easily leads us to think of the Unconscious as if it were like the contents of a woman's pocketbook,—full of everything but money and religion. Some think that if they could unleash the magic power of the Unconscious, they would have the equivalent of atomic energy and could work miracles with the wisdom supposed to be hidden in it.

In the second category, the Unconscious is the Fallen Angel, or a kind of Boris Karloff on a rampage in a haunted house. This "force"

is always pictured as the enemy of the individual. It has a will of its own and fights actively against the good intentions a person may have in mind. He, poor man, is but the battle-ground over which the struggle is waged between his "good conscience" and his "bad unconscious." "Neurosis" is the ill-begotten child of this conflict and he, unfortunately, is saddled with the care of this child he did not wish.

This is patently the old doctrine of Original Sin in pseudo-scientific dress. "Deep analysis" is substituted for incantations to exorcise this devil. It is often believed that nothing less than "deep" treatment can possibly save a person from his Unconscious. Those who hold this view see the individual as a "house divided against itself" which must fall unless "saved" by analytic therapy.

Fortunately, Adler set himself against a division of the psyche into separate parts. He was especially opposed to the idea that the individual is a helpless victim of a fight between his good nature and such a thing as the Unconscious. With his characteristic clarity of thought, he explained the apparent conflict when he said, "A person knows much more than he understands." The mental-emotional life of an individual, says Adler, is a *unified* striving of the psyche to bring the total organism into a position of security in his environment. All the movements and functions of the individual are toward the goal of security and survival. He knows what he is doing even though he may not understand the meaning of all of his movements. He should both know and understand the *coherence* of these movements, and how he has created them to advance him toward survival.

Freud stated that certain painful memories (trauma) were forgotten or pushed out of consciousness into the Unconscious. Here they were "held," seemingly against their will, but no longer accessible to the conscious mind. Only by a mystical process could they be brought up from the "depths of the unconscious" to the conscious level. Adler maintained that the difficulties experienced by an individual did not come from "forgotten memories" but rather from his *lack of understanding of himself in relation to those around him*. His security-ideal calls for kinds of relationships not compatible with social living; he "expects the wrong things" of life. His mistaken and unreal expectations, rather than his forgotten memories, lead him into conflict.

To understand this better, we must know Adler's explanation of the function called "memory." Adler maintains that memory is a

bridge between the past and the present. When a person is confronted by a situation, he must call up from the past experiences of his life the memories that *best prepare* him for an attack on the confronting problem. Memory is inseparable from emotion and emotion is only the 'steam' we need to push us toward or away from the confronting situation. *We select our memories according to purpose: They have no will of their own to impinge upon or elude us.*

Philippe Mairet, in his *ABC of Individual Psychology*, describes memory as a single tablet upon which the first impressions are scrawled all over in a large and simple style so that the succeeding ones have to be written around them, until the tablet is over-written again and again with smaller and smaller characters. Whatever happens to an individual, he reacts to it according to his previous experience of the most successful way of meeting that kind of situation. He does not remember most of the memories that guide him, but they exert their united pressure by the emotional tone of aversion or inclination to certain actions. Should he encounter an entirely new situation, he will either have no idea how to deal with it, or he will relate it to the most similar experience which is not even much like it.

The function of memory can be understood further by giving several analogous situations that may describe its actions. The recent invention of the "electronic brain"—the giant calculating machine—seems to support Adler's view of memory. Boiled down, the principle depends on whether a circuit is "ON" or "OFF." Any memory circuit that is "ON" must of necessity exclude all other memories that are antagonistic; they must remain "OFF." All memories cannot operate simultaneously. Only those are brought into action that serve the present purpose of achieving security in the present situation.

Let us compare memory to the field of vision of the human eye. An image is thrown on the retina and the "angle of vision" extends above, below, and to the sides. Many objects may be thrown on the retina but we can see clearly only that which is in the center of the visual field. We are, however, aware of objects on the periphery. If they move, we are conscious of them even though we may not be able to see them clearly. A movement on the periphery of vision may claim our attention and lead us to shift our eye so that it becomes the center of our attention.

The field of memory can be likened to the field of vision. The past experience is recorded as on a flat tablet (not in layers). When

we are confronted by a situation, in order to achieve our security, we shift our eye over the tablet to the nearest similar situation from the past and bring into focus the memory-emotions that will help us in preparing our approach to the present situation. Those memories that are not in the center of our attention are not forgotten nor repressed, nor buried. The individual is focused on those memories which he feels he must employ in the present situation, lest he be defeated. Any other memories would be anti-survival in terms of the goal he is trying to achieve.

Let us see how this operates in a specific situation. A man wakes up to the fact that he is feeling depressed. A few days before, he was proud of the success he was having on his job and with his outside relationships. Now nothing seems worth while; he sees no advancement or recognition in his work and nothing pleases him. The earthly lot of everyone else seems more glamorous. He is haunted by memories of past failures, discriminations, and disadvantages. He cannot summon memories of happy vacations, job advancements, love affairs, and other events that seemed wonderful when they happened. When asked for random memories from his childhood, he brought out "forgotten" instances where siblings or contemporaries were favored above him. All his memories seemed to prove that he was being held back in life. He was feeling very sorry for himself as well as angry at others around him.

When asked in what situation his memories had changed from success to failure, he dated the change as following his visit to a friend three days previously. The friend had displayed some expensive purchases and boasted about imminent job advancement due him. Comparing his own current situation with that of his friend made him angry (jealous) because he did not consider his friend as any more worthy than himself. Feeling that his friend was more loved made him feel lowered by comparison. Self pity (loving oneself) was the first compensatory activity. The hostility he engendered toward his job and other factors gave him "steam" to fight for the preferment and favor that he envied in his friend. "Survival," to him, meant being the *most favored* and anything less seemed a threat to his security.

Another excellent illustration of how memory works is seen in conditions of stage fright. The individual has prepared his speech and knows it perfectly. He recites it before members of his family without hesitation. But when he faces a strange audience, not a word comes

through. His knees shake, and his tongue sticks to the roof of his mouth. In spite of appearances, he has not *repressed* his memory of the speech. Only his situation has changed; he feels his strange audience may not love him and he feels threatened by possible criticism. His attention is focused on his *security* and he dares not expose himself; he flees without firing a shot.

Adler taught us that the focus of our attention (which corresponds to the focus of vision) is always on our security. But this term "security" is a purely relative term and not the same for each individual. We regard as "secure" all those experiences in which we have had past success. We tend to avoid situations for which we have had no training. "All life is a matter of training," says Adler. What we have trained ourselves to do with success does not appear as a threat.

As another analogy of how memory works, we may compare it with the telephone system of a city. Any telephone is potentially connected with every other phone in the whole world. But in spite of this, you call only those numbers that serve a current need. The others are not "repressed"; we do not phone the hardware store if we want to buy sugar; our call is appropriate to our need.

Let us see if these analogies hold up as we examine a real life situation. A young woman was facing the prospect of marriage to a man whom she liked, but at the same time she was aware of a strong resistance to taking this final step. As Adler would say, "She knew more than she understood." As the time for marriage approached, she became irritated, critical, and often depressed. She did not understand her behavior.

After stating her problem, she launched immediately into a discussion of her relations with her father when she was a child, and of her parents' marriage. In short, her confronting situation was marriage, and she was telephoning all those old memories to ask them whether she would be "secure" if she were to marry. Their answer was "No."

She was the oldest of three children and her father's favorite in the earliest years of her life; he took her on trips with him and she felt secure in his favor. The father was a pedant and had a very critical attitude toward his wife; there were constant arguments over money. His pedantry, in time, led him to find fault with his daughter, too, in an effort to bring her up to his high standards. She, in turn, began to see his shortcomings and developed a negative attitude toward him.

Open resistance broke out and developed into a bitter battle. All three daughters finally rejected the domineering father and severed all contact with him.

Throughout college as well as during adolescence, this girl avoided men. She did not dare to have a date until she was twenty-two years old. The man she was currently interested in was impotent; she avoided men who seemed completely healthy. In short, her early experience with her father left her with more and stronger negative experiences about "males" than pleasant ones. She felt that marriage might plunge her into her mother's earlier situation and that she too would be "helpless" before male aggression,—as she had been herself as a child.

Her conclusion about men and marriage was a simple one: "Men bully women in marriage—avoid marriage!" This was easy to do when she was younger. As she grew older, she realized that the position of an unmarried woman in our society is not so fortunate either. Though her life-training was against marriage (anti-survival), common sense told her she must move in the direction of marriage, if possible. By selecting a "lame duck," she felt less threatened than if she were considering a stronger man.

But as in the case of stage fright, when the time approached to face the critical moment, her ideal of security asserted itself and she began putting in telephone calls to all the memories of negative experiences in her youth. And since dreams are but a part of the function of memory and also serve the goal of survival, she created dreams to justify herself in holding this man at a safe distance. Her dreams, too, agreed with her purpose.

This woman was not the victim of "the Unconscious." She was quite aware of the individual factors noted above. "She knew more than she understood." Why do we need Oedipus or Electra to explain her? Why not, as Adler says, rely on common sense?

Her mistake was that she equated all males with her father and did not allow for individual differences. This was a generalization about all men based on primary experience with only one. The same was true of her view of marriage. She had accepted this false generalization so early in life as a truth that she had never questioned its validity; she behaved "As If" it were an axiom. It was an obvious mistake in reasoning and for that very reason escaped detection, for we are all *oblivious of the obvious*. We are like grandma looking for

her glasses which are perched on her forehead. Those "pressures" which we have had from the beginning are so much a part of our experience that they attract none of our direct attention; they are only on the periphery of our awareness. It requires an "outsider" to call them to our attention so that we may shift our viewpoint regarding them.

When she was a child and unable to support herself, there was nothing she could do to escape her father's aggressions. But she is no longer a child and is now as able as a man to resist any unfair aggression of a mate. In the business world she manages very well to cooperate with her employers and does not fear exploitation by them. The only thing she did not understand was that marriage is not essentially different from the kind of cooperation she has already learned to give male friends and employers.

What then, must she do to resolve her situation? She must know and understand that she is an adult. As such she can cooperate with a mate just as well as with her employers. On the job, she does not "telephone" her fighting-memories of her father. On the contrary, since memory is a bridge from the past to the present, she calls up memories of successful cooperation in which she has been a help and valuable in her work situation.

Adler maintained that it was most unfortunate that Freud introduced the idea that there is any kind of split in consciousness, that there could be such a thing as the Unconscious which could operate independently and often in opposition to the security of the individual. Such a thing could result only in chaos and the individual would be nothing more than the slave of a stronger and mysterious power. Adler maintained that the functions of the psyche are integrated and cooperating functions just as the various organs and processes of the body serve each other. In fact, he insists that the psyche-soma is an indivisible unity that always functions *towards survival*.

"Behavior is a matter of training," says Adler, and all training is self-training in the final analysis. The child adopts an attitude toward his initial experiences and decides through trial and error what kind of things he will seek and what he will avoid. Adler calls this "a tested scheme of apperception," and the child depends on it to bring him into a secure position in relation to the outside world. This becomes his life style and he fits the confronting situation into this value-

system and deals with it according to the sensitive points established in his prototype.

An interesting mechanical device exists that operates much like the life style. Information of any complex kind is reduced to code numbers. Holes are then punched in a card containing these numbers. The machine is "set" for certain values selected for a certain use. All the cards can be run through the machine and it will be entirely "indifferent" to all of them except those for which it has been "set." These drop into a separate pile.

The earlier experiences and the *conclusions* we formed about them in childhood correspond to the punch marks on the card (formation of the life style). The daily experiences run easily through our life except when one comes along that corresponds to a "set." This is extruded as a problem-situation to be handled. As in the case of the young woman mentioned above, her nervous system was "punched" first with pampering from a male and then with strong negative experiences of male-dominance-in-marriage-and-home-relationships. With each approach of a male in this context, all the "memory-cards" that pertained were sharply extruded by the life style.

In recent years, engineers have used knowledge of electronics to build the electronic brain. It is made of thousands of electrical cells and can "remember" and compute in a way similar to that of the brain itself. Highly complex mathematical problems are given this machine. At points in the solution of such problems, the machine must remember and make judgments as it goes toward the solution of the problem. In certain ways, it can excel the human brain that built it. This invitation has given rise to a new field of investigation called "cybernetics" which throws further light in the thought-processes.

The brain and its processes are biological and therefore essentially mechanical and predictable. All these modern scientific investigations bring further validation of Adler's earlier shrewd conclusions. The more mankind has learned about man, the further we have got away from demonology and myth. The resemblance of the Unconscious to the old Devil is almost transparent.

Many psychologists are afraid to abandon the concept of the Unconscious as a Thing-in-Itself even though they may be uncertain of it as a separate, hostile entity. Many contend that Adler's treatment of difficulties is "too superficial" and does not go "deep enough." They are so enslaved by their image of memory as a series of levels that

they cannot think of it as a "flat surface" similar to the telephone system of a city, or similar to the electronic brain. Many are afraid to abandon the Unconscious, just in case it does exist. They are much like the ancient Greeks who had one shrine to the Unknown God, lest one might exist that needed to be propitiated.

What is it, then, that consumes hundreds of hours in the so-called deep analytic therapy? Adler showed that "all memory is tendentious." The person who is saying "no" to a confronting situation can spend countless hours calling up negative experiences to justify his "no." His negative memories flock like blackbirds. But all these memories tell us the same story,—"no."

As to the case of the young woman, she had met many healthy men who did not try to dominate her and to whom she was attracted to a degree. Had she considered marriage as being compatible with her ideal of security, she would gladly have encouraged their advances. But any movement by them to come closer threatened her security-ideal and brought out all her negative memories in her defense. She felt relatively safe with handicapped men and with men of minority groups for she had no serious intentions toward them.

Even if we regard the Unconscious merely as a convenient linguistic fiction that helps us discuss mental processes, it is still a potential source of error. There are but two kinds of memories, those that say "yes" and those that say "no." It is a mistake to say that there are conscious memories; they all come from the same place; there are no levels. All memories have one common purpose: they support us in our movement *toward* our goal of security. The positive memories lead us forward and the negative memories "jet-propel" us away from that which we value as anti-survival.

Medical men used to think of mind *and* body as separate entities. This handicapped them in the treatment of many diseases for a long time until they learned that mind-body is an inseparable thing. And by the same token, advances in psychotherapy are being held up by the idea that there is a division in consciousness which operates in contrary ways, outside the control of the individual. As long as the myth about the Unconscious persists, man will not be able to find the meaning of his movements toward security. Neuroses will still appear to be baffling entities defying understanding, instead of just ways of striving for a position of security when a person is faced with a situation he has not been prepared to solve in a more productive manner.

How, then, does Adler explain the neuroses if we abandon the myth of the Unconscious? "Life is a matter of training," says Adler. We are trained to solve most of our problems so that we remain "on the useful side of life." But if we are faced with a situation for which our training is inadequate and we fear a loss of personal prestige, then we may begin to make what Adler calls the "advance towards the rear" in order that so much may not be demanded of us in the way of responsibility. The "conflict," witnessed in neuroses, does not lie between the Unconscious and the Conscious; it is the disparity between the present life-training of the individual and the demands of a confronting situation which asks more of the individual than he is prepared and willing to give. He dares not risk defeat; hence he establishes an elaborate detour that will provide an escape from humiliation, or so he hopes. He reactivates kinds of behavior that he has used at earlier periods of life, behavior that won him an easier position in his family situation. Society exempts those who are ill from meeting full responsibility; he, therefore, finds it expedient to "remember" his previous devices for achieving exemption. The fact that he does not seem to understand his behavior is due to our old habit of seeking demons as explanations rather than finding rational explanations.

When we have eliminated myths as explanations for human behavior and people understand that *all behavior is a striving for a point of vantage*, then neurosis will be properly understood as a *deficient training for life* and we shall improve our educational method for better preparation. The learning-process (the search for security and success) is common to all living creatures; we learn only what helps us toward our goal if security. Memory is only the obedient servant of the learning-process; it is our ideal of security that determines what will or will not be learned.

In summary, we may show another example of how memory is always tied to the security goal. A young aspiring author submitted his first book for publication. To his amazement, it sold widely and won him great acclaim. Reviews were excellent and he suddenly became a public figure. His publisher immediately offered him a contract for his next book and an advance of funds on which to live while he was writing. Months passed without a line being written; he could not bring himself to begin work on the second book. He became deeply disturbed and his mind was filled with forebodings about his responsibilities. Though the critics had been most kind to his book,

his mind was filled with memories of savage reviews given some other authors, especially those who had done second books. His physical functions also suffered so that he was distressed in many ways. All these factors he "used" as reasons for not applying himself to his writing.

This unfortunate man was trapped. The acclaim given his first book was so great that he could not be sure of achieving the same or greater on the second. Maintenance of his security and personal prestige seemed to depend on *not* writing a second book that might compare unfavorably. Confronted with this possibility of defeat, he was unwilling to go forward, and sought a detour or escape. To justify his inactivity and unproductiveness, he called up all the negative memories at his command, especially those of his stern father who insisted that he win every tennis competition he played in public. He emphasized to himself only the dangers of failing.

As the time approached for him to deliver his manuscript, his panic became a desperation that he could not endure. Finally he had to decide either to risk failure and loss of prestige, or to give up writing and content himself with some other kind of work. He finally realized that risk is necessary for any gain in life and he finally got the courage to finish the book regardless of whether or not it was appreciated by the critics. Once this decision was made, his memories of defeats diminished and more hopeful memories took their place. The manuscript was finished without undue strain.

A short poem by Clarence Edwin Flynn is interesting in light of the above:

*To perceive two facts and remember them, that is knowledge.
To consider them together, and find meaning in their relationships,
That is reason.
To understand that meaning, and apply it, in work to be done,
Problems to be solved, responsibilities to be met,
And the living of each common day,
That is Wisdom.
Any child can perceive facts,
But it takes a man to relate them and find their meaning;
And only a superior man has insight to see that meaning
And the will to apply it in the living of his life.
At least, so says Hamid, the Sage.*