

THE UNCONSCIOUS MIND

A brief synopsis of my educational background may help you to better understand my thinking about the Unconscious Mind. I got my psychiatric training at the University of Chicago, when it was still strongly psychoanalytic in perspective. Then I enrolled in the Chicago Institute of Psychoanalysis, took some courses, and had a year of personal psychoanalysis. After that I went down the meditation path, mainly the Tibetan Kagyu version taught by Chögyam Trungpa. So I emphasize introspection, insight, and meditation in my psychotherapy.

Freud was the individual who brought the idea of the unconscious mind into public awareness. His theory of the unconscious mainly dealt with content. Freud would put people on the couch and get them to free associate, in an attempt to allow repressed memories to come up from the unconscious. Patients would recall traumatic experiences from childhood, and other feelings and thoughts. This process sometimes resulted in symptomatic improvement. Freud defined psychoanalysis as the process of making the unconscious conscious.

Heinz Kohut was the preeminent member of the Chicago psychoanalytic community in the 1970's, and one of my teachers at the University of Chicago. He developed a "self-psychology," and wrote the influential "Analysis of the Self: Systematic Approach to Treatment of Narcissistic Personality Disorders." He was of the opinion that few people had genuine unconscious content: people were unwilling to talk about certain mental content, but these were not genuinely unconscious. I tend to agree with Kohut.

My own thinking is that we have an unconscious processing system, and also a separate conscious processing system. In essence, these are two minds which work according to their own logic, process information, come to conclusions, make decisions, and can carry out actions. These are not psychological constructs like Freud's ego, id, and superego. Rather, they are processing systems operating through different circuits in the brain.

The Unconscious Mind is located in center of the brain, the limbic system, which is an archaic part of the brain. The Conscious Mind's circuits are in a different anatomical location, namely, the prefrontal lobe of the cerebral cortex.

Classical philosophy for the last 3000 years has promulgated a famous dichotomy between reason and emotions. Some philosophers such as Kant have championed the side of reason and rationality. Others such as David Hume championed the side of the emotions. (Reason is, and ought only to be the slave of the passions, and can never pretend to any other office than to serve and obey them.) What both sides seem to miss is that the "emotional" system is, of itself, a very intelligent processing system, not just a set of blind reflexes. The idea of intelligent emotions has been nicely developed by Robert Solomon, the late philosopher who taught at the University of Texas at Austin. (This concept is different from Daniel Goleman's Emotional Intelligence.)

The Unconscious Mind is very intuitive, spontaneous, intelligent, creative, fast, and powerful. In contrast, the Conscious Mind is slow, methodical, and comprehensive. The Unconscious can be restricted by a tunnel vision, hypnotic perspective. The Conscious has a global perspective and a wide awareness. Both minds are highly motivated to succeed, but they have contrasting methods of trying to attain success.

It seems very unlikely that the Conscious would deliberately create anxiety, depression, anger, guilt, panic attacks, insecurity, frustration, obsessions, addictions, compulsions, phobias, or pain. However, these do arise from the mind, and so it is clear that it is the Unconscious which

creates these phenomena. Most people think of these as symptoms, psychiatric diseases, or short circuits of some kind. In actual fact, they are simply expressions of the Unconscious in its quest to attain success. For example, a person may experience tremendous (unwanted) anxiety about an upcoming test. Yet this anxiety may propel the individual to study relentlessly for the test, resulting in an “A,” which is what the Unconscious wants.

The intention of the Unconscious is not to feel good, as many people believe. The goal of the Unconscious is to succeed. The Unconscious is just as willing to create pain, anxiety, and guilt as it is to create pleasure, in its pursuit of success.

The Unconscious has a limited perspective and impulsive behavior, and so it tends to make bad choices. This does not make the Unconscious a disease or part of a disease process. The Unconscious is not evil, nor is it trying to cause any harm. However, it tends to be unskillful, and so primary decision-making rights should be granted to the Conscious, and not to the Unconscious.

The Unconscious is fixated in its own way of thinking, its goals and obsessions. It never changes, cannot grow, cannot attain wisdom or perspective. It can be guided, if one has developed skills to do this. With a little practice we can differentiate which thoughts and impulses come from our Unconscious, and which from our Conscious. What is extremely tricky is that when we are in either mind, they both seem like “me.” As such, we attribute truth and wisdom to whichever logic system we are in at the time.

The attainment of nirvana can help us to understand these mental processes. In nirvana, we realize that there is no self. We do have a mind, body, and spirit, and we have a conscious processing system and an unconscious one. All of these serve a purpose, and can enrich our lives and our experiences. However, the attainment of nirvana is notoriously difficult. Most people are totally convinced they have a self. Fortunately, many people can understand some aspects of the Conscious and Unconscious without attaining nirvana.

These are conceptual ideas, and understanding them can help individuals realize what they have to deal with. (I don’t think that there are psychiatric “diseases.” There do exist psychiatric problems, which can cause tremendous harm and destruction.) Learning how to deal with one’s mind is a tremendous challenge, and people have to attain a great deal of wisdom and skill to accomplish this.

The experience of consciousness does not mean that the decision has come from the “Conscious Processing System.” Most of our beliefs and decisions actually arise from the Unconscious Processing System. I call it “The Unconscious” because much of the processing is unconscious. However the results of the processing are often conscious. Whether it is the unconscious processing system or the conscious processing system, we can’t really say that it is “I” who has made the decision. Many of our decisions do arise from our unconscious mind, and this can work well in many instances. However, the system of conscious processing, i.e. systematic analysis, processes information more thoroughly than the Unconscious, and makes better decisions. Unfortunately, the majority of individuals rarely use the Conscious Processing System.

Understanding these ideas helps people to understand the operation of their minds better. The Unconscious Mind is one of our greatest assets, filled with great creativity and intelligence. Similarly, the Conscious Mind is indispensable in helping us to manage our lives skillfully. We need to appreciate both processing systems, and use them to our advantage.

- John Nadas