

Whatever Happened to the Unconscious?

A Critique of Dissociation, Multiplicity, and the Eclipse of a Unitary Self:

Theoretical Challenges to Donnel Stern and Philip Bromberg

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Contemporary perspectives on the unconscious vary widely in scope and content, from displacing the dynamic unconscious altogether, to appealing to neuroscience, to favoring postmodern sensibilities that subordinate psychical processes to language. Donnel Stern and Philip Bromberg are two such proponents of these redirective shifts in contemporary thought; and the force of their ideas have arguably reshaped the way many contemporary analysts have come to conceive of mental processes. However rich in clinical utility, these theoretical postulates are not without serious conceptual omissions, particularly when raising the question of selfhood, agency, and unconscious enactments. In what follows, I will attempt to offer an adumbrated meditation on the philosophical implications of their claims with the hope that this may lead to a spirited dialogue between advocates of a dissociative model of mind and those who privilege a dynamic unconscious.

Both Stern and Bromberg have enjoyed theoretical prominence within contemporary psychoanalysis by questioning the presupposed dominion of the unconscious over the puissance of consciousness and language. One cannot ignore in good faith how herculean, causally efficacious, and advantageous conscious experience, especially the role of language, has on psychological organization and development, which of course transpires within the contours of

our familial attachments and cultural ontology. Notwithstanding, there appears to be a predilection among some theorists to construct a false dichotomy between these categories when both stand in relation to their dialectical, hence symmetrical, counterparts. Yet for others, there is a tendency to collapse one category into the other, thereby erasing any distinction between the two realms or orders. One such proponent is Don Stern. As I understand him (1987), unconscious experience is only that which was introduced in some fashion through consciousness yet actively interrupted, suspended, unattended to, blocked and/or avoided, hence left unformulated, whether this be material semiotically encoded and sequestered on parallel levels of distributive processing, defensive constellations designed to protect the subject from psychic threat, the pure (formal) realm of potentiality, or as prereflective non-propositional thought lacking attention, self-conscious awareness, or mnemonic potency. In the end, Stern seems to equate unconscious experience with anything that is linguistically unarticulated and lacks “clarity and differentiation” (p. 37). This definition could equally apply to the most sophisticated forms of unconscious mental functioning or a simple act of conscious inattention.

Since Freud’s early departure from a dissociative model of consciousness for a repression model of unconscious process, psychoanalysis has been tacitly led to believe that dissociation and repression are mutually exclusive categories, when they are not. Contemporary theorists seize upon this assumption when advocating for dissociation as a better theory for understanding unconscious experience (see Howell, 2005) at the expense of retaining repression as a viable construct that aids clinical theory. The either/or false dichotomy that gets erected is that dissociation displaces the need for a repression model or that dissociation becomes subsumed or tantamount to repressive functions. Stern (1997) defines dissociation as “the avoidance of

certain formulations of present experience, . . . [which is] a channel or current along which certain meanings can flow and others cannot. To dissociate is simply to restrict the interpretations one makes of experience. . . [or] a restriction on the experiences we allow ourselves to have” (p. 88). Here Stern equates this phenomena with unconscious experience, but not in any dynamic way, that is, not in a way that an unconscious agency orchestrates, executes, sustains, or harbors. Dissociation from this definition is entirely possible through the operations of consciousness. There is no unconscious teleology, no unconscious ego directing such mental actions, no unconscious intentionality of any kind. “Formulations” or “interpretations” that are “avoided” or barred are simply linguistic processes that are either foreclosed or “restricted.” What Stern calls the unconscious is merely formed through the repudiation or absence of linguistic construction.

Stern’s focus on dissociation as both a defensive process as well as a benign passivity of inattention further parallels Bromberg’s work on the subject. What Stern calls “unformulated,” Bromberg (1998) calls “unsymbolized.” In fact, it is in the realm of “presymbolized experience” (Bromberg, 1998, p. 132) where dissociation transpires on unconscious levels of information processing that block or abort the emergence of formulated conceptual thought due to danger associated with conceptual formulations that are too cognitively intense to bear. Like Freud’s repression censor, this implies an active banning or barring of consciousness, an aborting of the symbolization process altogether. Here Bromberg, underscores the centrality of trauma on psychic organization. Bromberg emphasizes the defensive and adaptive transformational capacities of dissociation, as well as the pathological. He specifically points toward how dissociation leads to self-hypnoidal and amnesic mental states, and how it becomes a normative

and essential operation in the organization of personality. Of course, that which we are unaware of at any given moment becomes a form of unconsciousness even if our attention may be drawn to it. The question becomes how are these self-hypnoidal and amnesic states instituted if by definition we are unaware of our Self during such operations? More specifically, how is dissociation capable of lending order and organization to personality structure if by definition it is fractious and non-consolidatable?

What is not directly discussed by Stern or Bromberg is *how* unconscious agentic processes instantiate themselves as dissociative enactments. Presumably Stern would deny the unconscious any agency—or at least this is inferred from his text, while Bromberg would not. But these are not questions they directly entertain. It is not enough to confirm the ontic function of dissociation without explaining how it is made possible to begin with. What I have argued elsewhere is that unconscious experience as dissociability is derived from the basic dialectical processes that govern mental life, first and foremost constituted through unconscious agency, and more specifically the unconscious ego (Mills, 2002a). Dissociation is momentary fragmentation in self-continuity—itsself a spacing—a split, fissure, or gap in being. From this standpoint, dissociation is the agentic expression and overdetermination of unconscious motivation as teleological intent.

In many ways, dissociation is a failure at representation—whether this be a failure to *re-present* visual images of events, such as traumas, affective resonance states, or somatic forces that persist as embodied unconscious memorializations. Such unconscious schemata may actively resist becoming recollected within conscious awareness when under the direction of defense and self-protective currents, or evade conceptual formulation or linguistic articulation in

consciousness for a variety of reasons, defensively motivated or not. Moreover, dissociative content may have simply not been encoded due to adaptive and normatively benign aspects of inattention, detachment, or compartmentalization (Naso, 2007). But most importantly, dissociative processes must be directed by a mental agent executing such dynamic activity, and here I do not see this issue being directly addressed by many contemporary writers. Dissociability in its most elemental form is none other than the proclivity of the psyche to split or modify itself from its original simple unity as embodied apperceptive desire (Mills, 2002a), dividing itself into bits or pieces of self-experience through self-externalization, only then to *re-gather* and *re-cover* its self-division and externalization and incorporate itself back into its immediate self-constitution or internal structure; only to have the process repeat itself endlessly through an ongoing trajectory of dynamic pattern (see Mills, 2000b, for a review). In psychoanalysis, we have come to call this process projective identification.

My understanding of the unconscious is that it is process oriented, process driven, and process derived, what I have outlined in a theoretical system I have coined *dialectical psychoanalysis* or *process psychology* (Mills, 2000a, 2002b). Process psychology displaces the primacy of language over the unconscious, but it does not negate the value of signification. Instead, the unconscious incorporates the sign and builds a whole elaborate matrix of unconscious semiotics that conforms to its own laws and its own rules of signification fashioned by its own hands. The linguistic turn in psychoanalysis only partially accounts for unconscious dynamics, for the postmodern collapse of the subject and subjectivity in favor of the reification of language in my mind is misguided. What is fundamentally at stake is the ontological status of the unconscious.

Freud (1915) alerts us to the fact that the unconscious declares itself as discontinuities in consciousness, what I prefer to call spacings of the abyss. We know them as apertures, perforations, or lapses in experience, where time is momentarily eclipsed by the presencing of absence—a hole in being. Dissociation is only one such phenomena in our “gaps of experience,” what Stern (1987) refers to as “empty space” in the “beginning of life” (p. 60). But such empty space is full of non-being, of nothingness, hence no-thing is there, only experiential flow, appetitive pulsation—desire, a hovering over a clearing simultaneously exposed yet closed, open yet occlusive, the yawning gulf of the abyss. The abyss is never completely consolidated or unified, only discontinuous but unifying in its functions.

While many contemporary psychoanalytic theorists remain naive to formal metaphysics, various factions have also posed divided and contradictory notions on the nature and meaning of the self. What has generally been uncontested among several predominant postmodern positions—more specifically within the genre of Foucault, Deleuze, and Derrida—is the insistence that the autonomous self is a fiction. As Lacan (1977) puts it, the ego is an illusory misrecognition (*méconnaissance*) of the Other. These convictions reify society, culture, and language, hence semiotics, which in turn define all discourse about selfhood, and thus causally determine any element of personal agency that we might attribute to an individuated subject. In other words, all aspects of personal subjectivity have been conditioned by cultural signifiers that subordinate the individual to the symbolic order of language operative within one’s social ontology. From this standpoint, there is no individual, hence no self. And what we may customarily call a ‘self’ is really nothing other than a linguistic invention based on social construction.

On the other hand, when discourse on the self is given attention in the relational literature, the notion of the self has been theoretically altered from a singular unity to a multiplicity of selves. Popular among some relationalists today—most notably Bromberg, Mitchell, Harris, and Davies—is the belief that there is no singular unitary self; rather there are a multiplicity of selves that exist within each subject, which in turn are ultimately governed by an intersubjective or dyadic system that determines how multiplicity is instantiated to begin within. Bromberg (1998) is clear when he says “there is no such thing as an integrated self” (p. 186), instead there are “other” (p. 13), “many” (p. 311), or “several selves” (p. 256). It is one thing to argue that there are multiple ego-alterations or self-states that populate intrapsychic life due to the multiple operations of psychic modification (such as through the parameters of dissociation and defense), but it is quite another thing to say that each subject contains a conglomeration of multiple selves that may or may not be in touch with one another yet exist and act as independent nominal agents within a singular mind. Although I agree that self-states may be modified elements of original instantiations as previous expressions of mental processes that have undergone internal division, differentiation, and transmogrification—which may further be experientially realized as atemporal, non-unified, incongruent, dissociated, and/or alienated aspects of mind—it is unfathomable to me how one can view a singular subject as possessing multiple selves that coalesce as existent independent entities.

Multiplicity can be legitimately explained as a unique and particularized experiential activity within the mind that has potentially formed or acquired new organizations of self-experience and adaptation through defensive transformations of earlier or conflicted archaic processes in response to real or perceived threat, anxiety, and/or trauma; and this is substantiated

time and again in clinical practice. But when you commit to the proposition of multiple entities within a singular subject, you have the messy burden of explaining how multiple entities could possibly exist within a singular embodied being whereby each entity inhabits the same body, perceptual apparatus, and experiential medium regardless of qualitative differences in desire, content, or form. The resultant array of conundrums is unbounded: Who is the governing agent among agencies; and how could you epistemologically justify that there is such a governing agent to begin with? Who or what organizes or unifies the cacophony of experience if there are different beings within one mind? Who or what is ultimately in control of the mind? How can multiple selves share anything derived from their own nature when by definition they are independent entities that compose different natures? Separate entities by definition cannot share or participate of the same nature because they have separate essences by virtue of their differences. Yet discourse on multiplicity directly assumes that separate selves within a singular mind can intuit, feel, absorb, influence, and communicate with one another, hence they must have a shared essence in order to do so. Therefore, multiple selves within one mind cannot exist because they would not have any ability to converse or have contact with the other selves in any way unless they were derived from the same essence. Some theorists clearly confound this issue.

Separate selves eliminate the possibility that there could be any shared psychic participation among these different selves because they would have to have separate experiential mediums or apparatuses that radically vary in phenomenological content and form. What this means is that all experience would have to be perceived and assimilated by a separate psychic register within each self or self-state and hence organized by independent agentic forces processing and guiding self-experience. But how could this be so? How could two or more

entities with two or more essences co-habitate and participate of each other's essence when they are ontologically distinct, thus incapable of intermingling without altering their essences, hence annulling any notion of difference to begin with? These are palpable logical contradictions that any metaphysical theory of duality or multiplicity must be able to account for in order to salvage some theoretical credibility.

From my standpoint, a multiplicity thesis is most legitimately justified by appealing to a developmental monistic ontology governing the subjective mind of each individual, thus accounting for psychic division, differentiation, and modification of content and form (viz. self-states) without generating separate psychic entities (qua selves), each with their own separate essence. To justify a theory of mutually exclusive, multiple essences that have the capacity to interact and intermingle would lead to some form of occasionalism, monadology, or parallelism, each with their own particular set of problems. Explanations of modified self-states, psychic realms, or experiential orders of subjectivity are quite different from multiple subjects, and this is precisely what the relationalists who avouch such a theory of multiple selves need to consider.

Elizabeth Howell (2005) conceptualizes mind as reducible to dissociative processes, and she is following in the same theoretical trend as many relational postmoderns. This view lends itself to parsimonious and possibly reductionistic accounts of the complexifications of mental functioning, not to mention it introduces a theoretical problematic for not adequately addressing the question of agency within a dissociative model. If everything we call mental or psychological is a multiplicity of self-states, how is a state organized? What processes or mechanics are operative that constitute dissociability to begin with? Does this merely devolve into

neurobiology? From my account, one has to have active unconscious agentic functions executing mental activity or this argument collapses into and privileges a materialist model of consciousness. Following this line of reasoning, the unconscious is not a necessary psychoanalytic construct let alone an ontological force in the mind. Furthermore, if you do not allow for agency directing mental activity on multiple levels of systemic psychic organization conjoined as a unifying totality that makes multiplicity possible, then you have a problem with human freedom and causality to boot.

If dissociation theory is to replace a model of dynamic unconscious processes and is said to account for all normative and pathological enactments, then how are enactments executed if you cannot sufficiently account for agency? And if agency is to be attributed to consciousness, and dissociation occurs outside of conscious awareness, then are we not begging the question of what constitutes dissociation? If dissociative enactments devolve into consciousness, then this is contradictory because dissociation is presumed to transpire outside of conscious awareness. And if the answer is somewhere to be found in brain processes, then are we not committed to material reduction or a mereological fallacy? Not only does this not adequately answer to the question and mechanics of dissociative enactments, it subverts the philosophical question of unconscious agency.

Freud (1894) talks about how the splitting of consciousness that takes place in defense is in the service of keeping affect and ideation “detached” from one another. This ideation, however, is not merely dissociative, where signification and thought are relegated to what is simply “unformulated,” as Stern would tell us. Rather, for Freud ideas are “weakened” yet held in dynamic reserve until a “fresh impression . . . succeeds in breaking through the barrier erected

by the will” (p. 50). This is the beginning of Freud’s theory of a dynamic unconscious that thinks, feels, and actively converts mental phenomena by either producing associative links or by creating disjunctions: the former involves assigning a semiotic to unconscious experience, the later involves instituting a protective function. Here I believe that Freud succeeds in accounting for both dissociation within consciousness as well as explaining how the content of what becomes dissociated (i.e., affect, sense impressions, ideas) is organized within the abyss. This means that unconscious content has a life and a force of its own that is sustained within a dynamic underworld and creates unconscious pressure that becomes an onus for the ego to deal with. What this ultimately means is that dissociation and repression are not incompatible processes nor contrary psychoanalytic theoretical models that clash with one another or cancel each other out. Rather, they operate on stratified levels of psychic reality carried out and maintained by the dynamic agency that properly belongs to the unconscious ego.

Dissociative enactments must be exercised by an agentic teleological organization of mind executing the enactments, or else you have the intractable problem of multiple essences conversing, or you have the view of the mind as a biological machine that is turned on by the environment devoid of freedom and agency. This sounds like Skinner is potentially alive and well in contemporary psychoanalysis. Although I cannot do justice to this complex issue here, I do propose that an adequate solution may be found by conceiving the multiplicity of the self as a dispersal of modified and differentiated self-states that are ontologically conjoined and inseparable from a unitary self that is a *unifying unifier*, but one that is not static or unified. Rather, the self is pure process that is systemically and developmentally organized as a dynamic self-articulated complex holism. Here the inherent dichotomizing that characterizes the unitary

versus multiple self debate can find resolve in a process psychology that dialectically accounts for plurality within a unifying conception of mind.

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