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Major panel: The unconscious.

Werner Bohleber

Question 1:

What is your theory of unconscious processes? What other conceptions would you contrast with your conceptualization?

Given the multiplicity of psychoanalytic theories and systems of thought, it is not surprising that a wide variety of conceptions of such a key notion as the unconscious can be discerned today. These extend from the classical definition of the unconscious as the locus of repressed instinctual representatives to dissociated, unformulated self-states. The neurosciences and the cognitive sciences too, as well as developmental research, have contributed significantly to a modification of our view of the unconscious. I am convinced that we must not disregard these developments in other disciplines, but that we must give them careful consideration so as to determine whether their findings are compatible, both conceptually and in terms of content, with the phenomena that we investigate.

In an analyst's mind, theories are much less elaborately formulated, and available in less self-contained form, than in their published versions. An analyst may therefore integrate diverse concepts from various preferred authors and schools into a theoretical system of reference that includes personal elements and is consistent with both his scientific and his personal pre-scientific convictions. In this way, he accumulates in the course of time a body of implicit clinical knowledge that possesses a high degree of complexity and cannot be represented directly in words.

Our theories attempt to formulate concrete situations in abstract terms, and this is often possible only by recourse to metaphors. In any self-reflective questioning of one's theoretical ideas, one cannot fail to encounter the element of metaphor. This applies particularly to an abstract theoretical notion such as

that of the unconscious, which can always only be inferred, but never apprehended directly by an empirical approach. The traditional, classical, conceptual edifice is a spatial one (Reed, 2003). Although we know that this geography of the mind is metaphorical, it nevertheless influences our implicit thinking. The psychical apparatus appears in our thought as a space with three superimposed strata. At the deepest level lies the system of the unconscious. When we use such metaphors, there is always a risk of their becoming reified in our own thinking and then guiding our clinical and theoretical ideas.

Compared with Freud's position, our present-day understanding of unconscious processes has expanded substantially. I should like to summarize this understanding by dividing the unconscious into three distinct functional kinds.

1. The dynamic unconscious

For Freud, repression was the principal characteristic of the dynamic unconscious, the only kind of unconscious in which he was interested. Its contents were in particular instinctual representatives and wishful impulses, which sought to be fulfilled and thereby tended to rise to the surface of consciousness, thus exerting pressure on the entire psychical apparatus. In order to succeed, these entities had to link up with ideas or representatives of wishes that had access to, or were accommodated in, the preconscious. Nowadays it is assumed that it is not only instinctual wishes that are conflictual and undergo repression, but also a whole series of other wishes, concerned with the preservation of narcissism, the sense of security, the avoidance of unpleasant affects, and so on. The dynamic unconscious is also the locus of unconscious phantasies, which act as guiding forces to organize psychic reality. These extend from loosely organized primitive early phantasies to stable, highly organized phantasies involving secondary-process thinking, which, for all their storylike or scenic quality, nevertheless reflect the character of the primary process (Sandler and Sandler, 1998). They can be modified or overlain by new experiences and transformed by defensive processes. Alongside these phantasies there may be unconscious assumptions

or convictions – for instance, that one’s aggressive impulses will lead to the loss of the object’s love and to abandonment. Not every unconscious mental content can be regarded as an unconscious phantasy.

2. The non-repressed unconscious

Although Freud felt compelled to assume the existence also of an unconscious that was ‘not repressed’, he at the same time indicated that he was not particularly interested in it (1923, 18). However, the non-repressed unconscious has for some years now been a focus of psychoanalytic interest. What is accommodated within it are principally the early object relationships, precipitated in the form of representatives or of internal objects, of embodied modes of sensorimotor coordination, of schemata of action and interaction, and of phantasies and expectations. It may also be regarded as the locus of individual bonding behaviour, as well as of the ‘implicit relational knowledge’ studied by the Boston Change Process Study Group (2010; Lyons-Ruth, 1999). All these contents are unconscious, because they have their origins in experiences from the preverbal period of life. Although represented only rudimentarily on the symbolic level, they are nevertheless significant in intentional and psychodynamic terms because they may be determined by conflict and defence. Another denizen of the non-repressed unconscious is Christopher Bollas’s ‘unthought known’ (1987), as the internal precipitate of interactions with the transforming objects of early infancy. Donnel Stern (1997), too, is alluding to this form of unconscious experience with his concept of the unconscious as ‘unformulated experience’. He sees this as the raw material that can subsequently be processed reflectively and endowed with meaning.

The correlate of a non-repressed unconscious in cognitive research is the concept of an implicit memory, which contains not only the precipitates of preverbal experiences, but also early interaction patterns and learned skills. Contents of an implicit unconscious are manifested in transference patterns and in transference/countertransference enactments. In the last 15 years, enactment has come to be seen as a vital concept in relation to the

actualization of unconscious processes. Both parties, the analyst and the analysand, come to be involved in an unconscious pattern of interaction and communication – a pattern that must be accommodated in a scene, for the analysand cannot express it in any other way (Argelander, 1970; Klüwer, 1983). If the interaction and affective involvement can be elucidated, one of the patient's unconscious convictions or phantasies will become verbally accessible.

3. The creative unconscious

Individual mental life bears the stamp of structural conflicts, and analytic treatment seeks to achieve a better balance among them. In this connection, unconscious processes in effect perform a corrective function. For instance, dreams may result in a correction of attitudes and conflicted postures, thus providing the dreamer with a sense of growing personal authenticity. On the basis of this function, some psychoanalysts have supplemented Freud's conception of the unconscious with a 'romantic' understanding, in which the unconscious also becomes the source of being-a-person. There have been many such revisions of the Freudian model in recent years, and in my view they constitute a necessary and promising correction. Like Bion, Grotstein (2009) conceptualizes the unconscious as a symbolic process that generates meanings and supplies the external world with metaphors and poetic images. Newirth (2003) invokes a 'generative unconscious', which he distinguishes from the 'repressed unconscious' and the 'relational unconscious'. He sees the 'generative unconscious' as the seat of subjectivity and of 'being a subject'. As a concept, Winnicott's 'true self' also belongs here, as does Bollas's 'unthought known' or the same author's concept of the 'idiom', which, itself unconscious, must unfold in an individual life in the form of objectivations.

The organizational structure of unconscious processes

It is important to dispose of the possible misunderstanding that these three forms of the unconscious constitute different mental spheres. They are in fact distinguished by the organizational form of their processes. In referring to the

unconscious, one is thinking in terms of systems or areas of the psyche, but this carries the risk of seeing them as sharply demarcated from each other rather than as involving fluid transitions and continuities. Freud, for example, refers to 'a sharp and final division between the content of the two systems' (conscious and unconscious) (1915, 195), which as a rule arises only at puberty. In his view, the aim of psychoanalytic treatment is to make the boundaries more permeable so that derivatives of the unconscious can mediate between the two. I contend that, rather than thinking mainly in terms of areas of the psyche or systems, it would be better to regard 'conscious' and 'unconscious' as differing degrees of organization or forms of representation and modes of functioning of mental material, which are characterized functionally by, for example, primary – or secondary – process thinking or by energy cathexis with attention. These organizational forms too should be imagined not as sharply divided from each other, but rather as lying on a continuum (Mertens, 2010). Such a view would help to better conceptualize unconscious phantasies for example, which range from those being very primitive and loosely organized to those being most highly organized and complex.

As will I hope be clear, my approach to unconscious processes is less one that contrasts with other conceptions than an attempt to incorporate elements from them that I regard as important and to integrate them within my own ideas.

Question 2:

How do you conceptualize the influence of the unconscious in ordinary perceptual tasks, in interpersonal tasks, in creativity, in phantasy? Is your view of unconscious phantasy that it is created in the interpersonal field or discovered in the patient?

Nowadays, perception is no longer deemed to constitute a passive absorption of sensory stimuli, nor is it seen as an image of reality. The perceptual systems operate actively and intentionally. Incoming sensory information is recorded and initially processed into perceptual hypotheses, which are then aligned and synthesized with stored knowledge from a variety of cognitive domains. This

process takes place by way of conceptual nodal points associated in the form of a network. Hence the process of perception is one of preconscious construction, in the course of which unconscious object representations, interactive schemata and associated affects can be triggered by certain stimuli and then influence or are superimposed on the incipient act of perception. At the same time, conscious or unconscious defensive processes are also deployed, and these too can determine the act of perception, sometimes to the extent of obliterating perceptual units. Indifferent percepts, which are not associated with meaning and are therefore more variable, can much more readily be associated with unconscious meaning (cf. the function of the day's residues in dream formation).

Experimental research on subliminal stimuli (Fisher (see Shevrin, 2003) ; Klein, 1959; Leuschner, Hau & Fischmann 1998; Shevrin, 1973) has shown that perception also proceeds preconsciously and without the involvement of consciousness. Preconsciously perceived stimuli undergo immediate further processing, the concepts of declarative memory being only slightly activated, if at all. For this reason, these stimuli can be transformed much more easily into other meaning contexts. They are subject to unconscious, primary-process-type transformations and can therefore serve as a vehicle for unconscious wishes that seek to penetrate into consciousness.

Interpersonal situations are subject to the same perceptual acts. In this case, particular patterns of object relations are activated depending on the novelty of the encounter or on familiarity with the other person, these in turn being associated with particular memories. Unconscious patterns may also play a part and determine the interaction. With regard to the analytic relationship, this situation has been elaborated in great detail with the concepts of the transference and the countertransference and need not be discussed specifically here. Let me also refer to the processes of enactment, as a result of which analyst and analysand become involved in an unconscious pattern of interaction which can only be expressed scenically, but which offers the possibility of interpreting it in words and thereby making it accessible to consciousness.

The concept of unconscious phantasy is of paramount importance in clinical psychoanalysis and psychoanalytic treatment theory. Unconscious phantasies arise in early infancy and remain relatively unaltered in structure by later reworking. The question whether unconscious phantasies are discovered or created can ultimately only be answered dialectically, in terms of 'both/and'. I agree with Jean-Georges Schimek (2011), who ascribes two 'realities' to the concept of unconscious phantasy: on the one hand, it is a structure that organizes mental material, a kind of fixed scenario formed in early infancy that strives for realization; while, on the other, unconscious phantasy has the reality of one of the principal interpretive criteria used by the analyst in his or her interaction with the analysand in order to confer order, consistency and meaning on the mental material. I cannot here discuss the epistemological problem of intersubjective theories that see the clinical material of the analytic session as always co-constructed.

Question 3:

How are memories stored in the unconscious? Is there still some viable distinction between a 'thing presentation' and a 'word presentation'? Do you still have a concept of the preconscious, or has something superseded it?

Freud took as his starting point a uniform memory system and held that word and thing presentations were separated in the process of repression. Present-day memory research assumes the existence of at least two memory systems, implicit-procedural memory and explicit-declarative memory respectively, each operating with distinct mnemonic processes. Implicit memory is active at a much earlier stage in human development, whereas the brain structures involved in autobiographical memory do not form and become effective until the third or fourth year of life. Declarative memory contains episodic and autobiographical memories. It is this type of memory that best accords with Freud's dynamic unconscious, while early preverbal object relations and schemata of interaction are assignable to implicit memory. They influence experience and behaviour in the present, without representing the past in the form of consciously accessible memories.

Freud's old distinction between word and thing presentations is in my view no longer appropriate, and I should like to replace this conceptualization by the more comprehensive category of symbolization processes. On the one hand, this allows more precise distinctions in the degree of symbolization, while, on the other, it enables us to construe rendering-unconscious or being-unconscious as the loss or withdrawal of meaning.

The preconscious, understood as a descriptive unconscious, certainly does have a meaning today, because everything enumerated above under the heading of the non-repressed unconscious can be accommodated within it.

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