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THE PHILOSOPHICAL UNCONSCIOUS*

John Shannon Hendrix

Psychoanalysis declares itself an anti-philosophy. For Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan and their followers, philosophy does not take into account the role of the unconscious, and depends on the self-certainty of conscious thought. These are false assertions. Aristotle, the Peripatetics, Plato and Plotinus all acknowledged the role of what we now call unconscious thought: knowledge of which we are unaware, as in the *Meno* and *Phaedo*; and in the *Enneads*, intellectual activity that we do not apprehend in conscious thought (IV.3.30), thoughts that we do not consciously grasp (V.1.12), and thoughts prior to conscious awareness in perception (V.1.12). Psychoanalysis, like phenomenology, is based on discursive reason or *dianoia* and perceived phenomena, and neglects the role of noetic thought, thought not connected to sense perception. For Lacan, influenced by structural linguistics, the signifier, the phonetic utterance, must precede the signified, the idea, discounting the *logos endiathetos*, the unspoken word, described by Plotinus.

Freud and Edmund Husserl, the founders of psychoanalysis and phenomenology, abandoned the teachings of their professor Franz Brentano. According to Brentano in *The Psychology of Aristotle*, it is only when the activity of the active intellect, in this case of Averroes, ‘has made the images intelligible in unconscious thought’ that the material intellect ‘receives from the images the concepts of sensible things’ (Brentano 1977: 10). For Plotinus, it is only when the activities of intellect are shared with perception that ‘conscious awareness takes place’ (*Enn.* V.1.2). Freud, in *An Outline of Psychoanalysis*, saw the images of the unconscious becoming conscious through language (Freud 1949: 34), while Lacan, in *Écrits: A Selection*, saw the language of the unconscious becoming conscious through images (Lacan 1977: 2). Neither presented a complete picture of how the mind works; a more complete picture can be found in the *Enneads*. Psychoanalysis needs to reclaim the philosophical unconscious in order to present a complete

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picture of the mind.

In the *Meno* (80d; 81b–c) and *Phaedo* (68b–d; 74b), Plato suggested that we have knowledge of which we are not aware at the moment, in anamnesis or recollection. There is knowledge and understanding that is inaccessible to us in our normal thinking. In the *Phaedo*, the philosopher ‘separates the soul from communion with the body’ (64e3–10). Mind thinks best when it is untroubled by sense perceptions and affections, and ‘avoiding, so far as it can, all association or contact with the body, reaches out toward the reality’ (*Phd.* 65c3–8). Mind is deceived when it ‘tries to consider anything in company with the body’ (*Phd.* 65b9–12), in relation to sense perception. According to Aristotle in the *De anima*, it is necessary that mind, ‘since it thinks all things, should be uncontaminated’ (429a10–30), because ‘the intrusion of anything foreign hinders and obstructs it.’ Mind cannot be seen to be mixed with body, because then it would be qualitative; mind can only be receptive — it can have ‘no actual existence until it thinks.’ ‘Mind does not think intermittently’ (*De an.* 430a10–25). Thought is always present, but we are not always aware of it.

In his 1960 essay ‘Bewusst und Unbewusst bei Plotin’ (‘Consciousness and Unconsciousness in Plotinus’), H. R. Schwyzer called Plotinus the discoverer of the unconscious (Schwyzer 1960: 341–77). In the same year, E. R. Dodds wrote that in the thought of Plotinus ‘there are sensations which do not reach consciousness,’ and there are desires that are ‘unknown to us’ (Dodds 1960: 5). According to Dodds, Plotinus was ‘apparently the first to make the vital distinction between the total personality and the ego-consciousness’ (Dodds 1960: 5). ‘Ego’ thus becomes a philosophical term for the first time in the *Enneads*. In 1965 Dodds wrote: ‘Plotinus was the first writer to recognise that the psyche includes sensations, desires and dispositions of which the ego is normally unconscious...’ (Dodds 1965: 88 n. 4). In the *Enneads*, Plotinus asks about soul and intellect: ‘Why then...do we not consciously grasp them...? For not everything which is in the soul is immediately perceptible’ (V.1.12.1–15). Plotinus suggests that we do not notice the activity of intellect because it is not engaged with objects of sense perception, as in Plato and Aristotle. The intellect must involve an activity prior to awareness. The intellectual act in mind is only apprehended when it is brought into the image-making power of mind through the logos or linguistic articulation, thus ‘we are always intellectually active but do not always apprehend our activity’ (*Enn.* IV.3.30.1–17), as mind does not think intermittently.

‘Why then,’ Plotinus asks, ‘when we have such great possessions, do we not consciously grasp them, but are mostly inactive in these ways, and some of us are never active at all?’ (*Enn.* V.1.12. 1–15). Intellect, what comes before Intellect, or the first cause, and what results from Intellect, or soul, which is itself ‘ever-moving’ (*Enn.* V.1.12. 1–15), are all ‘always occupied in their own activities’ (*Enn.* V.1.12. 1–15), but those activities are not always perceptible; they are only perceptible when they somehow enter into perception, when their activity is shared. Since we are mostly preoccupied with our activities of perception, it is difficult to be aware of when the activities of Intellect are shared. Nevertheless, when the activities are shared with perception, then ‘conscious awareness takes place’ (*Enn.* V.1.12. 1–15). Otherwise we are unconscious of the activities of Intellect in discursive or conscious reason; we are not aware of the role that unconscious thought plays in the activities of our conscious thought and perception. This is the premise of Freudian psychoanalysis, that unconscious thought disrupts our conscious thought and activity in ways of which we are not aware, and it is possible to decipher the presence of unconscious thought in conscious thought through otherwise inexplicable phenomena in human thinking and behavior. The unconscious is only known in the gaps in conscious thinking, according to Lacan.

Plotinus is seen as the first philosopher to develop a systematic conception of the presence of unconscious thought in conscious thought, or a systematic philosophy of intellect involving unconscious thinking. Concepts found throughout the *Enneads* that contribute to a theory of unconscious thought in Plotinus include the *nous poiētikos*, noetic thought or Intellect; the intelligible as opposed to the sensible; *phantasia* or imagination; and the *logos endiathetos* or unuttered word, which aids in translating the intelligible into the presentation of it available to discursive reason or conscious thought, which is the *logos prophorikos* or spoken word. According to Plotinus, there are ‘a great many valuable activities, theoretical and practical, which we carry on both in our contemplative and active life even when we are fully conscious, which do not make us aware of them’ (*Enn.* I.4.10.20–34). Freud would call these unconscious activities. Conscious awareness, according to Plotinus, ‘is likely to enfeeble the very activities of which there is consciousness....’ (*Enn.* I.4.10.20–34) *Nous poiētikos* is a purer form of thinking, not contaminated by conscious sense perception. Plotinus did not suggest the possibility or concept of

a higher consciousness, but rather an increased level of what is not conscious: ‘only when they are alone,’ referring to the activities of thought, ‘are they pure and more genuinely active and living’ (*Enn.* I.4.10.20–34). Thoughts are stronger and purer when they are ‘alone’ (*Enn.* I.4.10.20–34), when they are unperceived by conscious thought and perception, when they are what Freud and psychoanalysts would call the unconscious.

Thoughts are purer before they have been connected to the images which allow them to be perceptible to consciousness; they are closer to their source, the One, in Intellect. They are purer as the prior ground for consciousness and experience in sense perception. The unconscious is the pure ground for conscious thought and activity, and unconscious thoughts are necessarily corrupted when they become conscious thoughts, if just in their connection to the image in imagination. The power of imagination is the great facilitator for Plotinus, but also the great corruptor. The value of life is increased, and the quality of the soul is increased, when mind is less fragmented and dispersed in the acts of sense perception and discursive reason, but rather ‘gathered together in one in itself’ (*Enn.* I.4.10.20–34).

Conscious thought and sense perception involve a fragmentation, dispersal, and diminution of the powers of thought. In order to avoid this fragmentation and diminution of thought, it is necessary to will oneself into self-reflection, and to will one’s intellect away from the objects of sense perception toward the images of Intellect reflected in soul, then away from those images to the prior source of the images in Intellect. It is necessary to will oneself towards one’s unconscious; the more access there is to the unconscious activities of one’s mind, the stronger and purer are the conscious activities. As John Gale recently wrote, ‘According to Neo-Platonism the analytic withdrawal into the psyche demanded an examination of unconscious desire, which amounted to a therapeutic process’ (Gale 2014: 157). For Plotinus this withdrawal was ‘a kind of catharsis — a breaking through the ego to get in touch with excluded, disassociated parts of the self’ (Gale 2014: 157).

In *Enneads* V.9.5, Intellect both thinks the ‘real beings,’ intelligible forms, and is the real beings. It is necessary that ‘primary reality is not what is perceived by the senses,’ because ‘the form of the matter in the things of sense is an image of the real form,’ the intelligible form known to

conscious reason as a reflection, and a likeness of the intelligible form with which it is connected. Intellect is composed of ‘rational forming principles’ which precede not only visible forms but also the mechanisms of soul, which can only be potential; as in the *De anima* of Aristotle, two distinct elements must be present in soul, like everything in nature. There is on the one hand, according to Plotinus, ‘something which is their matter, i.e., which is potentially all the individuals,’ and on the other hand ‘something else which is their cause or agent in that it makes them all....’ In the *De anima* of Aristotle, it is the sensible object which ‘makes the sense faculty actually operative from being only potential...’ (431a1–10). But it is not the object itself that actualizes the sense faculty, but rather the *eidos* or form of the object, pre-given in intellection, as ‘sense is that which is receptive of the form of sensible objects without the matter...’ (*De an.* 424a17–26). Imagination is a ‘movement produced by sensation actively operating’ (*De an.* 429a1–7), but it is not produced by sense objects themselves, or anything in matter.

Imagination facilitates the translation of sensible objects in perception to intellection. Following Aristotle, the intellectual act is not possible without an accompanying mental image, according to Plotinus in *Enneads* IV.3.30. The power to form the image in the mind’s eye is conversely always accompanied by the ‘verbal expression,’ or more accurately, the *logos endiathetos*, the word in thought, as Plotinus intended it, as opposed to the *logos prophorikos*, as it was translated by A. H. Armstrong. The intelligible image, and thus the sensible image, is not possible without the linguistic expression of it, and linguistic expression is not possible without the intelligible image. Perception of sensible objects is only possible after the idea of the sensible object is articulated in language in intellection. While the ‘intellectual act is without parts,’ as it has not been differentiated in discursive reason, and thus in perception, it ‘has not, so to speak, come out into the open, but remains unobserved within’ (*Enn.* IV.3.30), as unconscious thought.

But ‘the verbal expression unfolds its content,’ as a signifier would unfold the signified in language, ‘and brings it out of the intellectual act into the image-making power,’ allowing imagination to form the intelligible image which corresponds to the sensible image in memory. In doing so, the linguistic articulation ‘shows the intellectual act as if in a mirror’ (*Enn.* IV.3.30), as a mirror reflection might represent a sensible object, but the linguistic articulation in discursive reason does not contain the intellectual act; the intellectual act remains separated from sense

perception and sensible reality. The intellectual act itself is inaccessible, as the unconscious. In the same way, in psychoanalysis it is said that conscious thought contains a reflection or representation of unconscious thought, but conscious thought does not contain unconscious thought; unconscious thought is inaccessible to conscious thought.

The reflection of the intellectual act in the imagination, in the image-making power in language and discursive reason, might be described as Plotinus' royal road to the unconscious, as dream images, which are also translations of unconscious intellectual acts into images in the imagination, through the medium of articulated thoughts in language, were described by Freud as the royal road to the unconscious in *The Interpretation of Dreams* (Freud 1900: 647). Freud described the dream image as being derived, unconsciously, from the dream thought, which is a product of the unarticulated intellectual act during sleep. The dream image is transformed in dream work from the unarticulated idea in unconscious thought, through words in thought which mimic words in conscious thought, and the logos is then translated into the images in the dreams, exactly as for Plotinus. The transformation of the thought into the image depends on the mechanisms of condensation and displacement, according to Freud, so that the dream images do not have the same rational organization as sensible images in perception. This is because dreams do not have any intention of communicating anything, according to Freud, although the mechanisms of their formation mimic the mechanisms of the formation of the intelligible form through perception and language, or as Plotinus says, the formation of the *eidos* of the sensible object as it is subjected to the mechanisms of combination and division in apperception.

In *Enneads* IV.3.30, the intellectual act, the intelligent activity of the soul, is only apprehended, through a reflection or representation, 'when it comes to be in the image-making power,' as an intelligible form in the imagination produced through perception, language and memory, or as a dream image. Freud called the dream image as formed in imagination a *Vortellungsrepräsentanz*, a representation of a representation, as it was for Plotinus. For Plotinus, 'the intellectual act is one thing,' inaccessible in the unconscious, but 'the apprehension of it another,' through the representation in the mirror reflection of the representation in the logos or word in thought. Thus while we are always intellectually active, including while we are sleeping, we 'do not always apprehend our activity' (*Enn.* IV.3.30), because we are distracted by our conscious thought and

sense perceptions. That which apprehends the acts of intelligence, the imagination, also apprehends perceptions, which are necessary for the apprehension of intellectual acts in imagination; both word and image together are necessary for comprehension. Conscious thought prevents the apprehension of unconscious thought, as discursive reason prevents apprehension of the Intellectual. The imaginative faculty is a unitary activity which unites the sensible in perception and the intelligible in intellection, but it seems to be fragmented because of the lack of conscious apprehension of all of its activities, as described by H. J. Blumenthal in his book *Plotinus' Psychology* in 1971 (88).

Plotinus asserted that there are two souls, or two parts of soul, that which is connected to material reality in sense perception and *nous hylikos*, and that of the pure Intellectual, not connected to material reality. The mechanisms of perception, imagination, language and memory are active in both souls, but function differently and distinctly in each one. There are thus 'two image-making powers' in *Enneads* IV.3.31, but in life in the sensible world, the two powers are acting in unison, thus images in perception and imagination, as both sensible and intelligible, are double images. Sensible and intelligible images are not possible without each other, as are conscious and unconscious thought. We cannot recognize the difference between the sensible image and the intelligible image in conscious thought.

In *Enneads* IV.3.31 Plotinus asked, 'when the souls are separate we can grant that each of them will have an imaging power, but when they are together, in our earthly life, how are there two powers, and in which of them does memory reside?' Clearly the soul has two imaginative faculties, one concerned with the intelligible and the other with the sensible, although the intelligible imaginative faculty does not depend in any way on the sensible imaginative faculty. According to Blumenthal in 1977, Plotinus 'wishes to preserve the impassibility of the higher soul, and so tries to detach it as far as possible from the lower, and thus from a faculty of imagination which is closely connected with the body's needs and activities' (Blumenthal 1977: 248). The activities and images of imagination in the lower soul are duplications of the activities and images in the higher soul, and contribute nothing to them. The higher imagination is a condition of the functioning of the lower imagination; the lower imagination receives the intelligible image as a shadow or copy, which is subsumed in the light of the higher intelligible image. The only connection between the

two faculties is one of dependence, which is inapprehensible in conscious, discursive reason and sense perception, waking experience.

If we are able to apprehend the intellectual act as a reflection in a clean mirror, if we are pure and healthy of body and mind, then we are able to apprehend that the intelligible image is more powerful than the sensible image, because the intelligible image precedes the sensible image, which is dependent upon it. It is as if every image has two lights shining on it, or is illuminated from two different sources, intellection and perception. When we apprehend the intellectual act it is clear to see that the sensible light is just a shadow of the intelligible light. If the representation of the Intellectual in imagination is not apprehended clearly, if the body is unhealthy or distracted by sensible objects in perception, then there is disharmony between the two images and only the sensible image can be apprehended. The inferior light of the sensible, which is a shadow of the stronger light which is the intelligible, is apprehended as if alone, and only a shadow of reality can be comprehended, which is that portion of reality limited to sense perception, discursive reason, and conscious thought. For Plotinus, what we now call unconscious thought, as the Intellectual, is necessary for a full understanding of reality and human identity. A union of philosophy and psychoanalysis could be greatly beneficial toward an understanding of the human psyche.

Abbreviations

Arist. *De an.* Aristotle. *De anima* in *On the Soul. Parva Naturalia. On the Breath* (trans) W.S. Hett. The Loeb Classical Library 288. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1964.

Plotinus. *Enn.* Plotinus. *Enneads* (trans) A.H. Armstrong. The Loeb Classical Library 440 – 445. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1966.

Plat. *Phd.* Plato *Phaedo* in *Euthyphro. Apology. Crito. Phaedo. Phaedrus* (trans) H.N. Fowler. The Loeb Classical Library 36. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982.

Plat. *Meno.* Plato. *Meno* in *Laches. Protagoras. Meno. Euthydemus* (trans) W.R.M Lamb. The Loeb Classical Library 165. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989.

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