

The Unconscious, Aldous Huxley

The Unconscious

The unconscious can in all circumstances work either to our advantage or to our disadvantage—it is both negative and positive, creative and destructive. In orthodox Freudian theory there is much more concern with what may be called the negative side of the unconscious than with the positive. This was inevitable, seeing that the theory was developed in a therapeutic context; Freud, after all, was working with neurotic people in the Vienna of the late nineteenth century.

Quite recently a collection of Freud's papers, called by the editor *Creativity and the Unconscious*, was published. When one looks into the papers one finds that there is remarkably little on the subject of creativity; even when he was discussing the positive side, Freud had very little contribution to make.

In dealing with the positive side of the unconscious I would say that the work of the pioneer psychologist F. W. H. Myers is much more illuminating than the work of Freud. Myers was about fifteen years older than Freud but died about forty years before Freud did. His great work, *Human Personality and Its Survival of Bodily Death*, published posthumously in 1902, still remains after nearly sixty years a mine of information on the subject, above all, of the creative and positive side of the unconscious. This is a book which I recommend very strongly to anybody who wants to know about the positive aspects of what Freud dealt with on the negative side.

Let us begin now with the negative unconscious and with certain idiomatic phrases which we constantly use. Language contains a great deal of fossil wisdom, and many idiomatic phrases throw a great deal of light on the insights of the ages into the problems of man. We use phrases such as, 'I don't know what came over me'; 'I must have been mad'; 'I must have been out of my mind'; 'He can't have been himself when he did that'; 'I don't know what possessed me'. In the last phrase we come straight back to the idea of demonic possession which we found in Homer and in the Bible. It is very significant that we find in these idiomatic phrases such a clear picture of an ego surrounded by irrational forces which are continually breaking in upon it and compelling it to do all sorts of things that it really doesn't want to do.

We find that the unconscious can be dealt with as the representation in the mind of certain physical anomalies, that one type of negative unconscious influence is due to congenital physical defects of one kind or another. The physical defect of extremely low IQ, or of some kind of malformation, leads on the unconscious level to terrible feelings of inferiority which have to be over-compensated. Defects in the endocrine system lead to all kinds of very strange psychological results which are felt as barriers and hindrances and compulsions on the unconscious level and which interfere with the conscious self doing what it wants to do.

Then we have to consider what happens to people who find themselves born with a certain kind of temperament but who live in a society where that temperament is undervalued or even regarded as abnormal or disreputable. In this context, it is worth quoting a very touching little poem by William Blake:

O! why was I born with a different face?

Why was I not born like the rest of my race?
When I look, each one starts! when I speak, I offend;
Then I'm silent & passive & lose every Friend.
Then my verse I dishonour, My pictures despise,
My person degrade & my temper chastise;
And the pen is my terror, the pencil my shame;
All my Talents I bury, and dead is my Fame.

This is a very vivid picture of what happens to a person of one kind of temperament who finds himself living in a society in which that kind of temperament is greatly undervalued and where other kinds of temperaments are regarded as the only moral and reputable ones. Another example is the predicament in which an extremely introverted cerebrotonic child finds himself in a school where he is compelled to be a good mixer, to be constantly with other people, to join in the fun, etc.—all things which he finds completely opposed to his deepest ingrained nature. The result is that all kinds of disturbances go on in his unconscious and he very often develops a neurosis.

Freud was in part responsible for this 'somatotonic revolution'; he says in so many words that the extroverted way of life is the way of health for every man. Freud himself was an extrovert of a rather aggressive type, and undoubtedly that way of life was the way of health for him, but it seems to be perfectly obvious from observation that this is not the way of health for many people and that any attempt to force these people into adopting this way of life against ingrained and congenital tendencies is bound to have the most disturbing effects upon the unconscious.

Next among the influences from the physique are the influences of sickness, particularly chronic sickness—and much chronic sickness is actually of psychosomatic origin. The conscious ego starts interfering with what Aristotle called the 'vegetative soul'—the wisdom of the body; the body then goes wrong, and the normal processes of psychology are thrown out. The ego feels itself more than ever frustrated and in turn interferes with the normal functioning of the body still further, so that the whole process goes round and round in a terrible vicious circle, with mind and body making each other constantly worse and worse.

Human misery is greatly stressed by all the world religions. The Christian religion insists that this is a vale of tears, and the Buddhists say, 'I show you sorrow', meaning the world which we find around us, and 'I show you the ending of sorrow', which is the road to enlightenment. Now, probably about one-third of human misery is inevitable because it is due to the fact that we are sentient beings in a largely insentient universe which is not concerned with our well-being. But about two-thirds of our misery is strictly home-made and the product of ignorance, stupidity, and, to a less frequent extent, malice. The moral is, as the Duchess in Alice would say, to get rid of stupidity and ignorance, which naturally is a great deal easier said than done.

Now we have to consider that aspect of the negative unconscious which has been specifically the concern of the psychoanalysts and which is obviously an extremely important part of the whole picture. This is the side of the unconscious represented by repression. Freud himself said that we obtain our theory of the unconscious from the theory of repression. What happens is that we have, in childhood above all, certain urges, wishes, and purposes which do not conform with the cultural standards around us and which we soon learn to regard as highly discreditable. We therefore push them down into an area of the mind where we are no longer aware of them. However, repressed urges continue to exist, and they exercise a great and very pernicious influence upon our thoughts and feelings and actions on the conscious level. The age during which cultural pressure weighs upon us most heavily is infancy and childhood, and it is during infancy and childhood that most of the work of repression goes on.

It is not only the discreditable wishes and urges and purposes that we repress. We also repress incidents which are too painful for us to think about. We just cannot take the thought of certain things which have happened to us, and consequently we push them down out of sight. In neurosis, then, we are suffering the penalty of things which we did and things which happened to us many years ago, as well as the penalty of urges and wishes repressed.

Along with repression from the inside in the name of cultural ideals and of duty there goes conditioning from outside, and this is of equal importance in the history of the negative unconscious. Conditioning can take place no matter what the state of the subject, but, as Pavlov has shown, it is most effective when the subject is under great physical or mental stress. When the subject is in pain or is suffering from fear or is in the throes of some violent emotion—anger or even joy—he is peculiarly susceptible to conditioning. It is during these times of lowered resistance that conditioned reflexes are set up most easily and are most permanent. Pavlov found it exceedingly difficult to get rid of the conditioning which had been imposed upon dogs under a great state of stress. And precisely these Pavlovian techniques have been used in the so-called brain-washing both of enemies and of friends (brain-washing is probably used more intensively on Communist workers in China than it was even on prisoners during the Korean War). While it is quite clear that some conditioning is absolutely essential and very good, it is equally clear that plenty of conditioning is extremely undesirable and may lead in later life to very severe troubles.

We see then that a great part of our negative unconscious is due first to repression and then to the undesirable conditioning which has been put into us at an earlier period, often under conditions of stress, and which continues to act upon us very much as a post-hypnotic suggestion. Neurosis is the failure of the conscious ego to deal with the events of the moment in terms appropriate to the moment. Instead of dealing with what is happening now, the neurotic person deals with events in terms of repressed feelings and hidden memories from the past which are totally irrelevant to what is happening at the present time. In a certain sense it may be said that all psychotherapy is essentially a spring cleaning of the memory. It is not a question of getting rid of remembered facts—we do have to go on remembering the multiplication tables, our geography lessons, and so on. It is a question of ridding the memory of the painful emotional states which cause us to act in a completely inappropriate way in the present time. We are reacting not to now; we are reacting to then. Consequently, everything we do is completely pointless and senseless.

It has been realized for a very long time that the memory in its unregenerate form is a dangerous faculty which can put us very wrong. We find very interesting passages about this in Buddhist literature, and I was interested not long ago to find a passage on the problem of memory in the writings of St John of the Cross, the great Spanish mystical writer of the sixteenth century. He says, 'This emptying of the memory, though the advantages of it are not so great as those of the state of union, yet, merely because it delivers souls from much sorrow, grief, and sadness, besides imperfections and sins, is in itself a great good.' We may perhaps doubt whether the rather mechanical methods of emptying the memory employed in Catholic monasteries are likely to be very effective; nevertheless it is quite clear that these people were entirely on the right track. There is no doubt that really effective therapy would make use of some of the methods used in religion, combined with the various methods of analysis and abreaction therapy which can serve under modern conditions to cleanse the memory.

So much for the negative side of the unconscious—first the negative side due to physical influences and then the negative side due to repression and to conditioning from the outside. Let us now turn to what I would think is much more important: the positive side of the unconscious. Here again, let us start with the colloquial phrases which indicate the nature of the positive contribution which the unconscious makes to our life. We use phrases such as, 'It has suddenly struck me'; 'It has suddenly occurred to me'; 'I have had a brilliant idea'; 'A wonderful notion has come into my head'; 'The violinist gave an inspired performance'; 'The preacher spoke as though he were inspired'. Here we are back with the old Biblical and Homeric idea of supernatural possession, this time a good possession and not a demonic possession. Homer makes an appeal to the Muses to help him and speaks about minstrels who sin 'out of the gods'—a very remarkable phrase—and later on in Greek history we get the accounts of the Pythia of Delphi, who received the oracles of Apollo.

Thus we see that when we use words like 'inspired', which we do without any particular thought, we are carrying on a very ancient tradition; similarly we find that the Bible is full of these same ideas. St Paul in the Epistle to the Hebrews says, 'God, who at sundry times and in divers manners, spake in time past unto the fathers by the prophets' (Hebrews 1:1). When one looks at the works of the prophets themselves, one finds that they think of themselves as passive and very often reluctant instruments. They are not particularly anxious to undergo the tremendous influx of some non-rational and much greater power, but they have no choice. Later on, in early Christian times, we have accounts of the passive involuntary reception by the early Christians of what were called 'charismata'—gifts of the spirit which came involuntarily into certain people.

Let us now consider the positive unconscious in its relation to everyday life. When we look carefully into our everyday experience, we find that the conscious 'I' seldom comes up with a really brilliant idea—it is a kind of plodding faculty. We constantly get the impression that our best ideas come to us from an area of our mind which is not our conscious mind; phrases such as 'It occurred to me' are good representations of this fact.

The mechanism of the unconscious must be looked at more or less as follows: We consciously take in material which then is passed on to some layer of the unconscious (Freud speaks of this layer as the pre-conscious, but I would think there are deeper layers, beyond the repressed unconscious, where this material goes). There it undergoes a

process of digestion and organization, and it is then represented to the conscious mind in the form of some idea which is often felt to be extremely brilliant and illuminating, which the conscious mind could not of itself have concocted.

As this is such an everyday phenomenon, we can take it for granted and not think too much about it. However, we are very decidedly amazed by the more unusual phenomena of the same kind such as artistic inspiration. It is a significant fact that in several of the Indo-European languages the word for 'poet' and the word for 'seer' are the same. In Latin the word *vates* means both seer and poet; the same thing is true of the Irish word *fili*. The whole idea is that the poet receives inspiration from some other source than the merely self-conscious mind, and it is remarkable that many great poets in modern times have felt exactly the same way. Goethe says, 'The songs made me, not I the songs.' The French poet Lamartine writes, 'It is not I who think; it is my ideas that think for me.' Alfred de Musset says, 'One doesn't really work, one listens. It is as though some stranger were whispering in one's ear.' And Shelley makes a very curious remark, 'The mind in creation is as a fading coal, which some visible influence, like an inconstant wind, awakens to transitory brightness.'

There is a very striking phrase which sums up this whole idea in the writings of a romantic German philosopher, Frans von Baader, who says that Descartes was entirely wrong in saying 'Cogito ergo sum'. What he ought to have said was 'Cogitor ergo sum'—not 'I think' but 'I am thought, therefore I am'. In so far as I am a conscious ego, I think, therefore I am. But in so far as I am a creative unconscious, and in so far as my conscious ego requires the collaboration of the creative unconscious, I am thought, and therefore I am, on a more important scale than I would have been if I were merely a conscious ego doing my own private thinking—my own private thinking being strictly limited.

What may be called genius is the uprush of helpful material from the deep levels of the unconscious, which is then worked up by the conscious self into an appropriate form. Edison said that genius is nine-tenths perspiration and only one-tenth inspiration, but there has to be the inspiration first and then the work on it afterwards. Genius is the harmonious collaboration of the two parts of our being; it is openness to what lies below us on the unconscious level and the capacity to mould this material into forms which shall communicate to other people and shall carry over some of the meanings and feelings which the original artist had.

We must not imagine that all such uprushes are of the highest quality. Unfortunately, there can be uprushes from the unconscious of the utmost silliness and stupidity. A painful example of this is the case of Voltaire, who prided himself above all on being a tragic poet. Unfortunately, he was a very bad tragic poet. There is an extraordinary letter where he describes the writing of his tragedy *Catiline*, which is in five acts, in rhymed Alexandrines, and which he completed in a week. Nobody, he writes, who had not felt the afflatus of genius could imagine how such a feat was possible. No doubt that is true, but unfortunately the play is perfectly unreadable. The mode of genius in this particular case did not produce the results of genius.

The most non-genius type of inspiration of this kind is shown by those people who have a gift of automatic writing, who sit down with a pen and let the scripts come pouring out. The vast majority of these scripts are completely uninteresting and nonsensical, but they do come up from the

depths in the same kind of way that the inspirations of genius come to men of genius. The difference is that in the case of men of genius what comes up is originally of much better quality, and the work which they then put into it in their conscious state of mind brings the final creation to a pitch where it can be appreciated by other people and felt to be of great significance and importance.

Another particularly odd kind of intervention of the creative unconscious is illustrated by the cases of the so-called calculating boys. Every now and then we hear or read in the papers the story of a child who can perform the most astounding mental calculations—finding the cube root of seven-figured numbers in fifty seconds, etc. Let me quote the charming case of an English calculating boy called Blyth, who was born in 1819. This is a story which his brother tells of him:

The little boy, Benjamin, and his father were going for a walk before breakfast—the father liked taking a brisk walk before breakfast—and suddenly the little boy asked him, 'Papa, at what hour was I born?'

The father said, '4.00 a.m.'

'What o'clock is it now?'

'7.50.'

The boy walked on a few hundred yards in silence and then gave the number of seconds that he had lived (he was then six years old, roughly). The father didn't attempt to check the figure at the time, but when he got home he sat down with pencil and paper and worked it all out and then went with some triumph to the child and said, 'I regret to say you are 172,800 seconds out.'

The boy said, 'Oh, Papa, you have left out the two days for the leap years of 1820 and 1824.' Great collapse of Papa.

Why on earth do certain children have this fantastic power, and what mind do they have that is capable of this sort of thing? In recent centuries there have been two calculating boys who grew up to be men of first-rate genius, André Marie Ampère in France and Karl Friedrich Gauss in Germany. There have been several other cases where calculating boys grew up to be very capable mathematicians and intelligent men, but there have also been many cases where they grew up to be either completely mediocre or even virtually half-witted. The oddest of all these cases is that of a German called Dase who lived in the middle of the nineteenth century. He was incapable of understanding the first book of Euclid, but he had such an incredible faculty for doing sums in his head that he was paid a lifetime salary by the Prussian government for finding the factors of all numbers between seven and eight million. He spent his life doing this with an incredible rapidity. He had absolutely no powers of ratiocination at all, and yet he was able to do these extraordinary sums (which would now be done by electronic machines).

Let us now briefly speak on the subject of sleep. We are as well and as sane as we are only because the ego takes a holiday for one-third of every day. If we remained awake all the time, we should undoubtedly all be extremely ill or quite mad. And while the ego is out of the way during sleep, we may say that what is called the vegetative soul is functioning, without interference from this intolerable self and from the personal unconscious, and keeping us well and sane.

There is, however, some activity during sleep: dreaming. Most dreams naturally refer to events which took place during the day before we went to sleep or in very recent times; but some dreams, as the Freudians have pointed out, refer in a symbolic way to buried material. Yet others seem to partake of the nature of what Jung calls 'great dreams' and to refer to what he calls archetypal material on a far lower level of the unconscious. Some dreams don't even seem to refer to that, but to something which doesn't have any particular relation to the human psyche.

These archetypal and completely otherworldly dreams bring us to another very strange phenomenon of the unconscious, the phenomenon of visions, which we will touch on today and take up in more depth in a later lecture.

Spontaneous visions seem to be fairly common. Blake had them all the time, and we have some very curious accounts of the nature of his visions—for example, of how he came to make drawings of Sir William Wallace, the Scottish hero, and of Edward I:

[Blake] was sitting meditating, as he had often done, on the heroic actions and hard fate of the Scottish hero [Sir William Wallace], when, like a flash of lightning, a noble form stood before him; which he instantly knew, by a something within himself, to be Sir William Wallace. He felt it was a spiritual appearance; which might vanish as instantly as it came; and, transported at the sight, he besought the hero to remain a few moments till he might sketch him. The warrior Scot, in this vision, seemed as true to his historical mental picture, as his noble shade was to the manly bearing of his recorded person; for, with his accustomed courtesy, he smiled on the young painter; presently the phantom vanished and Edward the First, who also remained long enough to be sketched, took his place.

Then there is a very interesting account by John Varley of Blake's drawing of the famous head of the ghost of the flea:

I felt convinced by his mode of proceeding, that he had a real image before him, for at one point he left off, and began on another part of the paper to make a separate drawing of the mouth of the Flea, which the spirit having opened, he was prevented from proceeding with the first sketch till he had closed it again.

Another celebrated visionary was the eighteenth-century Swedish scientist and man of affairs, Swedenborg, who had visions of life in the next world of an enormous elaboration and detail which must have come to him with a complete sense of reality. And then there is the whole series of visionaries within the tradition of the Church, beginning with St Brigid of Sweden in the thirteenth century, who had visions of the Passion of Christ in the most elaborate detail, and ending with Catherine Emmerich, who died in the beginning of the nineteenth century.

Unfortunately these visions do not correspond with one another, and it is, therefore, impossible to say whether any of them are in fact veridical, cognitive visions. In most cases we probably have to put them down to what may be called the story-telling faculty which lies at the back of the mind. This very peculiar faculty seems to be present, to a certain extent, in all minds, and it can be evoked by various methods which we will describe later, although in certain cases it occurs spontaneously.

Here it is worthwhile mentioning that when Homer and the poets who followed him asked for inspiration from the Muses, they were not asking for poetical skill. They were asking for material. They were saying, 'Please tell me what really happened at the siege of Troy' (or what really happened during these mythical histories). Hesiod is delighted when the Muse provides him with some new names which he can bring in. Appeals to the Muses can thus be seen as appeals above all to this story-telling faculty at the back of our minds. As for the actual stylistic execution, this the ancient poets knew well enough and could do with their conscious minds.

We now come to a very ticklish subject, the subject of parapsychology. This in many academic circles is regarded as a rather obscene subject, a kind of intellectual pornography. Indeed, there are some academic circles where, I would think, it would be more respectable to study the works of the Marquis de Sade than the works of Dr J. B. Rhine. Nevertheless, I do happen to think that such phenomena as telepathy, clairvoyance, and precognition actually occur. I think it is impossible to study the enormous mass of evidence accumulated in the journals and proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research and the experimental work done in recent years at Duke and other universities without coming to this conclusion.

Why do so many otherwise open-minded scientific people refuse even to consider the evidence? The reason is that the facts, if they are facts, just don't make sense in terms of the Weltanschauung which we accept as more or less axiomatic. They don't make sense above all in terms of the view that we have of human nature and of its relation to the universe. In point of fact most of us are still influenced unconsciously by the hypothesis of Descartes about the nature of man and its relation to the world. Descartes insisted that the world was divided into two halves, one half matter and the other half mind, and that man was divided into a mind and a body.

The material half of the world he regarded as being composed of one substance, but the mental half was composed of innumerable substances, every individual mind being a separate impenetrable unit of a substantial nature. One unit could never react directly with other units, and it could react with matter only in relation to the matter of its own body and, through the body, with other pieces of matter.

The essence of this mental substance, Descartes insisted, was consciousness. We have already rejected this idea, but it seems to me now that in the light of modern psychology, and I would say of parapsychology, we have to revise even further the Cartesian assumptions. We have to insist that not only does the mind have this great unconscious side, but the unconscious side is not enclosed at its lowest fringe. Rather, it touches a kind of psychic medium out of which individual minds are crystallized, and through this psychic medium it is enabled to establish contact with other minds.

The Cartesian idea of a pure dualism within man has to be supplanted. Instead, we have to think of man as a composite of three factors: a body; what Western philosophers call pure ego, Eastern philosophers call atman, and St Paul called pneuma; and a psyche, which is not a separate, watertight unity, but rather a thing composed. We may have to think of the elementary psychological particles out of which the psyche is composed as being, in the vaguest sense of the word, ideas; these elementary particles can then be built up into complexes, like what the Buddhists call skandhas, and the whole thing bound together in a rather

precarious and unstable unity which we call the self, its instability being clearly proved by what happens to it in cases of mental disorder and even in stressful conditions of normal life.

We have then this picture of a precarious and rather unstable self in relation to an unconscious which is not shut in at the lower levels, or at the upper levels either, but is open at both ends, so that communications with other minds or a Mind outside itself are possible. This leaves us in an uncomfortable philosophical position, because such a conception just doesn't fit satisfactorily into the generally accepted world picture at the present time. The problem is being discussed by two eminent contemporary philosophers, C. D. Broad of Cambridge and H. Haverley Price of Oxford, neither of whom has come up with a satisfactory answer.

At the moment, then, we have to accept a kind of ambivalent notion about human nature. For most practical purposes we have to think in terms of something like a neutral monism, with the mind and body being aspects of the same substance. But we also have to think in the light of the facts of parapsychology, that to some extent mind is independent of body and can exist in a kind of psychic medium; that ideas may have a life of their own and may enter our idea system in a way which is very peculiar and difficult to understand; and that ideas may perhaps persist in existing long after the bodies connected with the minds in which the ideas were originally invented have died. There may be a kind of reservoir of this mental life into which we plunge; and above this, enveloping it and interpenetrating it, we may also have to postulate something which William James spoke of as 'cosmic consciousness' and which Bergson called 'Mind'.

I will leave this subject on this very unsatisfactory note, as an unresolved philosophical problem, for the good reason that I don't know how to resolve it and I don't think at present anybody else knows how to resolve it. But I feel quite sure that it will be resolved sooner or later. Meanwhile, we have to go on as best we may with this oddly anomalous situation in which we find ourselves.

The end