

Between conscious and unconscious: reducing opposition and increasing continuity

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ABSTRACT. – The protagonist of the contribution is the concept of implicit unconscious, a concept that means a more articulated and extended unconscious than that of classical and post-Freudian psychoanalysis. The resulting picture modifies the antithesis between the unconscious, which is the repository of dysfunctionality, and the conscious, which is the place of insight, and proposes a global space of mind that is in line with this theoretical set-up: the unconscious and the conscious are two different modes of ‘processing’ experiential data. In the field of clinical work, some hypotheses are proposed in order to read the patient’s unconscious work and identify a potential and evolutionary progressive space. The basic idea is that a conceptually transformed unconscious at the theoretical level, parallel to the clinical level, allows for a transformational and evolutionary unconscious in the patient.

Key words: implicit unconscious, potential unconscious, evolutionary unconscious, non-repressed unconscious, unvalidated unconscious.

In reviewing the relationship between the conscious and the unconscious, we will begin with Descartes and then proceed with Freud.

According to Descartes, consciousness is identified with the entire sphere of the mental space of the subject: a subject understood as a thinking substance. Within *res cogitans*, consciousness appears to be a source of certainty, with immediate, clear, and distinct evidence.

In short, for Descartes, thinking can only be rational and conscious thinking (De Robertis, 2009).¹

To our twentieth century, the delegation of corroding the Cartesian consciousness, downgrading the value of self-evidence, by virtue of the argu-

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¹ Equally, Locke (1690), in the *Essays on Human Intellect*, argued that there is not what you are not aware of, but unlike Leibniz, who proposed the existence of minute perceptions, always present but not perceived by consciousness.

ment that, as well as any other knowledge, the knowledge of ourselves is not so immediate, direct, and, so to speak, 'phosphorescent'.

It was Freud's revolution that introduced a different conception of the mental, proposing a binary model: the mental is not limited to the conscious; the unconscious is just as much a part of the mental realm. This was Freud's verdict, which split the Cartesian mind in two, like a fault. With this operation, two centuries of Cartesianism, which proclaimed and reduced the mental to consciousness, were cancelled out. When Freud presents the unconscious as a counterpart, as another face of the conscious, he conceptualizes a subject that is not exhausted in rational and conscious thought.

Descartes made his 'mistakes', but perhaps even Freud is not exempt from them. In fact, what remains deeply Cartesian in Freud?

Freud, as a good rationalist illuminist, continues to share the Cartesian way of conceiving consciousness. Freudian consciousness, the one that Freud makes coincide with the conscious 'portion', borrows all the properties of Cartesian consciousness: in the first place, rationality and evidence (*ibid.*). The fact is that the other part of the mind, namely the unconscious mind, is attributed with the measure of negativity and irrationality: the unconscious mind is a type of degraded mind, not *sapiens*, not suitable, instinctual, and irrational. These two latter characteristics are particularly evident in the *Id* of the second topic.

Today, however, after a long time from that primary approach and in the face of scientific evidence from many disciplines close to psychoanalysis, it is appropriate to correct this antinomy. The reinterpretation I would like to propose, also as a constructive stimulus for my contribution, lies in reconnecting the links between the unconscious and the conscious and in softening their antinomies.

We are talking about an antithesis identifiable from the origins. When Freud theorized the unconscious (and I do not say he discovered it, because for centuries philosophy, literature, myth, and so on had already addressed it), he viewed it, as I mentioned, in oppositional and conflictual terms with consciousness, as if they were two enemies. This clear division assigned the unconscious to the realm of what does not work, while the conscious was seen as the domain of understanding and insight – in other words, of what works. Unlike many contemporary scientific conceptions, conscious and unconscious were not understood as simply two modes of functioning.

We know that for Freud, the unconscious is timeless, therefore static, fixed, and rigid. Since the unconscious is a realm where change does not occur, no evolutionary process can be found within it; developmental and transformative movements are not traceable in the unconscious. I quote Freud: "The processes of the unconscious system are timeless (...) they are not altered by the passage of time, in short, they have no relation with time" (Freud, 1915, p. 71).

It may seem strange, but to revisit the unconscious, a starting point can be found in Freud and his writings. In fact, three pages later, Freud speaks of an unconscious that is “alive, capable of development” (*ibid.*, p. 74).

Then, with pleasant surprise, we come to discover that this Freudian unconscious hosts features of creativity and evolutionary potential, condensed in the words ‘capable of development’.

We cannot miss the contradictions in the Freudian text, testimony of how Freud was not a systematic scientist, but it doesn’t matter; let’s take the ‘best’ of what should have escaped from the pen of Freud!

Unfortunately, this annotation remained a simple hint in Freud that was not developed further, while the focus was placed on a malfunctioning unconscious, a storage site for trauma and repressed instincts, a static system lacking the capacity for growth.

However, today we can get leverage over this unconscious ‘alive and capable of development’ to propose an alternative to the ‘work’ of the unconscious.

A feasible way to further explore today this ‘different’ unconscious, which Freud intuited but certainly did not explore, lies in reflecting on a concept that, from various quarters and for some time now, has come to the forefront: the implicit unconscious. A concept that returns a more complex and different version of the unconscious, more confident in its evolutionary directions and in its mutative capacities, and not only conservative capacities. For example, the most reliable evidence and the main protagonist of the implicit unconscious is implicit memory (Weiskrantz, 1988): a form of unconscious memory that, however, is neither repressed nor traumatic memory, nor is it an unformulated memory (according to Stern’s model, 1997) or a non-represented memory (Levine, 2020).

Without underestimating the importance of the characteristics of the dynamic and conflictual unconscious in the area of psychopathology, I think that the mandate that psychoanalysis will have to face is to deepen the ‘other’ space of the unconscious. We cannot ignore the significant contributions that extrapsychodynamic research presents to us, which consequently leads to discussions about a ‘new unconscious’ (Hassin *et al.*, 2004).

About these investigations, without dwelling on the details of the data that have modified the concept of the unconscious, it is sufficient to consider, above all, the implicit memory, which is the most representative field of the ‘new unconscious’, but also the neurological models of emotions (Camerer *et al.*, 2004; Damasio, 1999; LeDoux, 1996; 2000) or the waking dream thought, originally proposed by Bion (1959; 1962) and then, in more recent times, deepened by Ogden (2004; 2005) and Ferro (2002; 2006).

In fact, the results coming from neuroscience, philosophy of mind, and cognitive science refute some established beliefs about the unconscious, beliefs that I briefly list:

1. The unconscious is placed in antithesis with the conscious.
2. It runs out in the work of repression, *i.e.*, in something static and blocked.
3. It performs the work of the negative.
4. It is the index of psychopathology.
5. For the development of the mind, the unconscious represents a *minus*, a constraint.
6. Finally, therapy cures because it replaces the unconscious with the conscious through three sequences: interpretation, understanding of insight, and therefore, transfer to consciousness.

Otherwise, the scientific evidence, especially from neuroscience and psychoneurobiology, confirms the assumption that the mind experiments and processes an enormous amount of information of which we are not aware (the estimate is around 95%) and that the large majority of the data processed by the mind is realized at an implicit, subliminal, or subpersonal level.

But there is something more: one must consider that the unconscious thought performs all the preliminary work, almost behind the scenes, in silence, which then flows into conscious thinking; as Roth states, “The states of consciousness are only the final product of extremely complex, refined, and articulated processes that take place at an unconscious level” (Roth, 2003, p. 14; cf. also 2001). An assessment that transforms the unconscious from being ‘disabled’ to being ‘differently abled’.

The concept of the *unconscious mind* exemplifies this idea, but at the same time, it is also a challenge for psychoanalysis to put some things back into practice. Eagle (1987; 2011) urged embracing a broader logic towards the unconscious. Even Modell (2008) has championed the need to revise the concept of the unconscious based precisely on the input of data provided by research from related sciences.

In summary, this evidence falsifies the Freudian idea that there is a unity, an integrity of consciousness fractured by unconscious data. On the contrary, it is appropriate to embrace the idea that the unconscious does not coincide exclusively with what psychoanalysis defines as dynamic, conflictual, pathogenic, or iatrogenic (Imbasciati, 2005).

Jung’s position in this respect is more far-sighted and more in line with the current stimuli: in fact, the Jungian unconscious does not rest solely on the space of damage and negativity, but also shows an approach that captures, in the unconscious speech of the patient, the resources owned by the subject. It is that a ‘vital drive’, an expression of the potential of ‘a more evolved mind’, that is, a mind capable of evolution (Jung, 1921, p. 530) and change.

And so, we come to the point. The unconscious and the conscious are not

places in the mind occupied by sharply divided representations: on one side, those that are repressed, dissociated, fractured, split, unmeaningful – or unrepresented – and maladaptive, attributable to the unconscious; on the other side, instead, those that are unified, cohesive, integrated, meaningful, and adaptive, attributable to the conscious.

This relevance has a considerable impact on the clinic: the operation of bringing consciousness and the formula of insight underlie a model of care based on the need to replace the unconscious with the conscious (Moccia & Solano, 2009). I believe that the task awaiting us psychoanalysts today is no longer to substitute the conscious for the unconscious but to reconceptualize the links and bonds between unconscious and conscious experience (Ogden, 2005). What is more useful is to reduce the distance between these two thinking modes and also to attribute unconscious adaptive aspects, following the subtitle of a well-known text by T. Wilson, which reads “Discovering the adaptive Unconscious” (Wilson, 2002).

The restyling of the unconscious focuses on emphasizing the relationship of collaboration and synergy with the conscious, leading to an idea of a mental space that is less divided and more in line with the neural map of the connectome. In light of this idea of mind, unconscious and conscious are two codes (Bucci, 1997; 2000; 2002) or two different modes of mental work that operate without a break (Tirassa & Bara, 1998). Differently from the *removed unconscious* or the *not removed unconscious* (Craparo, 2018), or the *not validated unconscious* (Stolorow & Atwood, 1993), I would like to propose a concept of *generative unconscious* (Newirth, 2003). By this term, I refer to an unconscious area as a source of generativity, creativity, and understanding of one’s experiences (De Robertis, 2024). It is a conceptual position that not only liberates the analyst from the obligation to ‘translate’ the unconscious and bring it into consciousness as if it were merely a transference, but also frees us from the late 19th-century prejudice – of which Freud is a key figure – that trusted the sequence of ‘consciousness-rationality-healing’ as the primary curative model.

An unconscious, transformed from a theoretical point of view, as I tried to present, also in clinical work, allows us to look at the transformative unconscious of the patient: that is, an unconscious vehicle of transformation, as Freud wrote, ‘capable of development’. In this way, the circle is closed: we have reached the Freudian starting point from which we started (De Robertis, 2024).

Now, through a brief clinical vignette, I would like to highlight how the possibility of a greater connection between the unconscious and conscious enables us, on the therapeutic front, to manage and value the changing factors that inhabit the implicit unconscious of our patients (De Robertis & Biondi, 2023).

Short clinical vignette

Ignacio is passionate about history and politics; in fact, driven by these interests, he enrolled in political science studies at the university, a pursuit that had remained unfulfilled for a long time, like many of his other wishes and projects.

One day in session, he engages in a deep disquisition centered on the history of the Latin American colonies (*en passant*, Ignacio is from a Mexican mother). In his discussion, he dwells extensively on the colonial period and subsequent independence, as well as the relationships between those colonized and those not colonized. Ignacio then concludes his speech by strongly emphasizing that those people who have decolonized have gained their autonomy and won the freedom to own and use their own territory and resources.

Beyond metaphor, as Lyons-Ruth (2008) points out, examining the pattern of 'implicit relational knowledge' displayed by Ignacio reveals a consistent tendency to be colonized by the other. Equally metaphorically, decolonizing means his ability, capacities, and resources to avoid being colonized in the relationship, to prevent the other from acting as a master over him: starting from the head of office, painted as a ruthless shark of human resources; from the sickly and weak mother who always asks for help; from the previous girlfriend, 'incapable' and demanding; and from his pregnant wife, who needs someone to do everything for her, otherwise she gets tired. As we can see, they are people close to him, and the patient takes their burdens as an obedient servant. But then he complains with a sordid and projective anger, feeling like a victim in their hands, obliged never to have space and time for himself.

However, in this session, his speech reveals an evolutionary metaphor that resides in his unconscious. I am referring to the vital unconscious, which is capable of developing. What is the new idea that is beginning to take shape? To be able to be also master of his own territory, to be more autonomous in the management of his own time and things, of his own legitimate needs, wishes, and resources. So, Ignacio thinks of re-enrolling at university, he is getting back to jogging and other little things, like restoring his old drum and repairing his historic Hi-Fi.

A transformative thought that lives in his unconscious, an unconscious 'alive and capable of development', which makes me think that he begins to activate the enterprise of his 'personal decolonization'.

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