

The Unconscious - Definition and Use

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ABSTRACT

The term unconscious has been used since centuries. The term has remained an obscure issue to the philosophers and to the common man also. Many philosophers have tried to define the term 'unconscious'; in different times. But there is no any valid definition of unconscious. In antiquity, the term, unconscious had variously been referred to the mysterious, exotic, which is not attainable, beyond our consciousness. The idea of unconscious had been explored in various cultures. It was recorded between 2500 BC and 600 BC in Hindu text "Vedas". In modern period, we have Shakespeare's play Hamlet where Shakespeare tried to explore the term unconscious through the workings of Hamlet's mind. Western philosophers such as Spinoza, Schopenhauer and Nietzsche developed the idea of human mind. This paper tries to explore the concept of the unconscious that was used over the years. The term has been extensively used by psychologists across the world. However, the term has different connotations in different periods. The present paper is an attempt to enumerate different connotations of the term 'Unconscious'.

Keywords: *Unconscious, Id, Ego, SuperEgo, Dream House, primordial images, collective unconsciousness, repression, archetypal criticism, libidinal wishes, nucleus of being, linguistic construct, the other, 'Ich', 'Es', and 'Uber-Ich, flux*

*The key is to knowledge of the essence of the conscious
life of the soul to be found in the region of unconscious
- C.G. Carus.*

The concept of the unconscious remained a highly speculative issue. Freud speaks of 'primal Fantasies'. While discussing the nature of the unconscious content Freud argued that the content of the unconscious consists only ideas. It is incorrect to speak of the unconscious instinctual impulses, emotions and feelings. An instinct can never be an object of consciousness only the idea that represents the idea. Freud made extensive use of the unconscious theory of conscious psychoanalysis. Freud conceived it as a sort of garbage, dump for wishful impulses that are unknown to us. Prior to Freud various attempts had been made by various philosophers to define unconscious. It is of course a concept, which existed before the advent of psychoanalysis and has long been familiar both to philosophers and psychologist.

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The Unconscious: Definitions

Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary defines unconscious as:

*That part of one's mental activity of which one is not aware but which can be detected and understood through the skilled analysis of dreams and behavior.*ⁱ

On the other side, the World Book Dictionary defines unconscious as:

*Unconscious is that part of the mind containing thoughts and feelings, of which a person is not directly, or fully aware of one's unconscious thoughts, desires, fears or other emotions which may become groundless obsessions, compulsions and other forms of abnormal behavior. The unconscious is a special realm with its own desires and modes of expression and peculiar mental mechanisms not elsewhere operative.*ⁱⁱ

While, N. Krishnaswami defines unconscious as:

*A crucial notion in Freudian theory is a primary process that seeks immediate gratification.*ⁱⁱⁱ

Another critic Julian Wolfreys defines unconscious in the following words:

Unconscious as the mental realm into which these aspects of mental life that are related to forbidden desires and instincts are consigned through the repression.^{iv}

Above definitions of the term unconscious clearly indicate that the unconscious is a part of human mind, which is beyond the consciousness. It seems that various attempts have been made in different times to pin down the mysterious nature of the unconscious. However there is no valid definition, which could analyze unconscious in full. It is imperative to see more definitions to pin down the context of unconscious. Gerald S. Blum defines unconscious as :

That vast quantity of mental life which either never was in consciousness or, if previously conscious has been repressed. It is a dynamic concept in the sense that unconscious impulses are continually striving for conscious expression in a very active way.^v

Origin of Concept of the Unconscious

Most of the earlier philosopher arrived at the concept of the unconscious through a study of knowledge. To these writers unconscious was:

The unconscious seemed necessary to account for the phenomena of thought and perception and above all of memory.^{vi}

Sigmund Freud was the first who gave new dimensions and importance to unconscious. However, Freud was not originator of the term but he held that the human behavior largely is an effect of the unconscious. He means human behavior is determined and controlled by the unconscious. Freud, an Austrian psychiatrist on whose procedures and grounds, the psychoanalysis emerged in earlier decade of twentieth century. Psychoanalysis is a form of literary criticism, which uses some of the techniques of psychology in the interpretation of literature. Psychoanalysis has also a therapeutic function, which aims to cure mental disorders by investigating the interaction of conscious and unconscious elements in the mind. Freud's all work depended upon the theory of the unconscious. According to Noelle McAfee, Freud's model of the mind is as follows,

In the early days, Freud noted two aspects of the self the conscious and the unconscious. In his later days Freud offered a tripartite model of subjectivity in which the self is composed of in German, 'Ich', 'Es', and 'Uber-Ich'. The English equivalents are "I" It and over 'I' for

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various reasons, English translators have sought to translate the perfectly plain German into obscure Latin: the ego the id and the super ego.^{vii}

Where the ego is known as conscious part of the mind and Id is known as unconscious part of the mind, which means the internal biological drives, such as the drives for pleasure, self-preservation and sometimes self-destruction. As we have noted that Freud was not the originator of the term the unconscious but his uniqueness lies in his attributing to it such a decisive role in our lives. The concept of repression is linked to the idea of the unconscious. According to Freud:

We obtain our concept from the theory of repression.^{viii}

Freud argues that repression which is the forgotten or ignoring of unresolved conflicts, sexual instincts, socially unacceptable desires they are forced out of consciousness and repressed into the unconscious.

Freud says that:

The repressed serves us as a prototype of the unconscious.^{ix}

This means, the unconscious is part of mind, which consists of such unresolved unacceptable desires and these desires continually tries to come out in the realm of conscious mind.

In contrast to Freud, Carl Gustav Jung distinguished individual unconscious from the collective unconscious. For Jung the individual unconscious was similar to the totality of unconscious.

In this connection Gerald S. Blum made a valid point:

Jung offers his own version of the concept of the unconscious, which has some slight overlap with Freud. First of all Jung divides the unconscious into two parts; the personal unconscious and the collective unconscious. The personal unconscious said to contain forgotten memories, suppressed painful ideas, perceptions and finally contents that are not yet ripe for consciousness.^x

It seems that Jung's model of the personal unconscious differs from Freud in the following manner.

1) Jung gives less emphasis on repression: Individual
2) Unconscious for Jung is not result of repression but it is a result of tendency of every individual to develop one sided. In adapting one part of life neglected in favor of the other and the neglected part tends to become unconscious. The second part namely *Collective Unconscious* according to Gerald S. Blum:

Refers to the racial inheritance of significant memories. It contains irruption from the deepest part of the unconscious that can never be made conscious.^{xi}

Jung proposed different version of the unconscious. His theory of the unconscious departs radically from psychoanalytic criticism. He developed his own theory of archetypal criticism. Jung's emphasis was not on individual unconscious like Freud, but on what he calls the collective unconscious shared by all individuals. However, what he means by *collective unconscious* Jung writes:

In every individual there are present the great 'primordial images' those potentialities of human representation of things as they have always been inherited through the brain structure from one generation to the next.^{xii}

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These primordial images which are present in our racial memory become archetypes. According to Jung we come to know these archetypes through the symbolic representation in dreams and in literary work. In this regard M. H. Abrams observes that:

The collective unconscious shared by all individuals in all cultures, which he regards as the repository of racial memories and of primordial images and patterns of experience that he calls archetypes.^{xiii}

However, Jung assigns a very different role to the functioning of the unconscious. For him collective unconscious contains the wisdom of the ages, lying dormant in the brain continually active, the unconscious creates combinations of its content, which shows the future path to individual. These unconscious combinations are said to be superior both in refinement and extent to the conscious ones. Bloom observes the potential of unconscious in the following words:

The collective unconscious as an unparalleled guide for human beings... the mighty spiritual inheritance of human development reborn in every individual constitution.^{xiv}

Further Jung argues that literature is an expression of the archetypes of the collective unconscious. In this regard M. H. Abrams observed that:

He does not like Freud, view literature as a disguised form of libidinal wish fulfillment that to a large extent parallels the fantasies of neurotic personality. Instead, Jung regards great literature as, like the myths whose patterns recur in divers culture, an expression of the collective unconscious.^{xv}

Jung has proposed very different version of the unconscious. His theory and practice gave birth to new approach to literature called the archetypal criticism. The Neo-Freudian considers that the concept of the unconscious proposed by Freud to be one of Freud's greatest contributions. Neo-Freudians accept the principle of unconscious functions but criticizes Freud's connotations of the unconscious as a place, where for example repressed experiences and Id forces can combine with each other. According to Gerard S. Blum:

Their main criticism is that Freud's original treatment connotes the unconscious as place, where instincts or their mental surrogates reside; and the later conception of the Id is even more guilty in this respect.^{xvi}

The earlier versions of unconscious are orthodox. Jacques Lacan, French Freud has developed new version of unconscious in the light of poststructuralist thoughts. Lacan argues that the unconscious is the nucleus of our being. And this unconscious is a mere linguistic construct.

Unconscious is structured like a language.^{xvii}

Lacan instead of Freud's orthodox, chaotic, primordial, instinctual, pre-verbal unconscious proposes that unconscious is structured phenomenon like a language. In his famous essay 'The Insistence of the Letter in the Unconscious', he says that:

As our title suggests, beyond what we call, 'the word;' what the psychoanalytic experience discovers in the unconscious is the whole structure of the language.^{xviii}

Throughout his literary career, Lacan developed a number of different definitions of unconscious and the emphasis that he placed on each concept changed throughout his career.

- The unconscious as a gap or rupture
- The unconscious is structured like a language

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- The unconscious as a discourse of other.

Jacques Lacan's concept of unconscious is better than anyone, Lacan, a brilliant French psychoanalyst, emphasized the relation of language to unconscious functioning. Language being metaphoric and symbolic is one step removed from real. And the gap between the symbolic and the real is an illusion of human social existence although our lives are structured by conscious thought and speech. We are really influenced by this rupture between the symbolic and the real. In other words, what is missing from our lives because we filter our experience through our social dependence on language and the real of the symbolic? Therefore, the unconscious is a side effect so to speak of our separation from reality because of our use of language. Further Lacan says that because of separation and lack we lead to desire, the unconscious is primarily governed by the desire of the other i.e., by the social world around us. Thus, the desire could be thought of as the unspoken hidden aspect of our being.

Let us consider what Lacan mean by the unconscious. His seminal essay entitled 'The Insistence of the Letter in the Unconscious' is a clear insight of Lacan that unconscious is a linguistic phenomenon. The essay begins with the question,

Why psychologist of today not realizes that their realm of truth is in fact in the word.^{xix}

He considers language is the key point in the analysis of unconscious by a psychoanalyst. Further Lacan argues that Freud has given much importance to the unconscious but in reality, Freudian psychoanalysis also deals with verbal science. Lacan has given evidence to prove his point that the unconscious is structured like a language. He argues that Freud's dream mechanism known as condensation and displacement correspond to two basic poles of language called metaphor and metonymy identified by Roman Jakobson. The two poles of language are used by unconscious to self-expression. This use of linguistic means by unconscious is evidence of his dictum that the unconscious is structured like a language. Further, Lacan says that whenever unconscious is being discussed, the amount of linguistic analysis increases, since puns, allusions and other uses of such devices manifest the content of the unconscious. The uses of devices by unconscious lead us to say that the unconscious is a linguistic structure.

Julia Kristeva, one major contributor of psychoanalysis has not much to say about unconscious, but she developed her model on the Lacan's linguistic model. She not only remains on the Lacanian model, but goes beyond the Lacanian model of unconscious. She argues that the unconscious is not a biological entity with all its libidinal energies but it is a part of the psyche. For the notion of unconscious, she heavily draws from Freud. Further, she equates her model of unconscious with Lacan's linguistic model. Both Lacan and Kristeva held that the unconscious is a realm of flux. Thus, Kristeva's theory of unconscious is related with the subject's unconscious being, which is unknown to the conscious mind. For her, the self is not aware of all forces that shape them. There is a factor called unconscious, thus for her,

The unconscious is a domain of desires, tension, energies and repression i.e., not present in consciousness.^{xx}

In this way, she speaks about the concept of unconscious. She held these unconscious processes are important or subject's identity construction. The term subjectivity existed not with the awareness of self but comes in to being with the unconscious process from which the subject is unaware.

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The term unconscious has been changed in the course of time. Freud gave it the decisive role in human life while Lacan held it as a linguist construct and Kristeva proposes it as a flux. In psychoanalytic criticism, the term has its own importance. The whole theory of Freud is depended upon unconscious. He held that literature is nothing but an expression of writer's unconscious. That means in shaping a literary text, unconscious plays an important role. Freudian critics set to analyze these unconscious contents, wishes, desires in their original form through analyzing a literary text. Freud calls to such unconscious wishes as a latent or overt content of literature. And the form of disguised wishes is covert or hidden content of literature. Freudian critics pay close attention to the conscious and the unconscious mind. They associate literary works, overt content with conscious mind and covert content with unconscious mind. They privilege the covert content of the literary work; a work is really about and aims to decipher both. They also pay close attention to the unconscious motives, wishes, desires that of the author and that of the characters of a literary work

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Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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